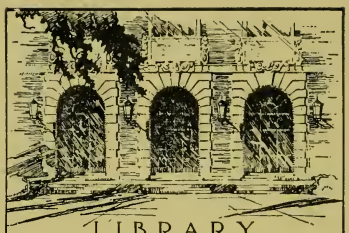
Mr. Bryant's Mistake



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MR. BRYANT'S MISTAKE

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March 1891

MR. BRYANT'S MISTAKE

BY

KATHARINE WYLDE

AUTHOR OF 'A DREAMER,' 'AN ILL-REGULATED MIND,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES—VOL. I

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'SPREAD not into boundless expansions either of designs or desires. Hang early plummets upon the heels of pride, and let ambition have but an epicycle and narrow circuit in thee. Think not thy own shadow longer than that of others, nor delight to take the altitude of thyself.'

CONTENTS

PART I

PAGE

MARY SMITH 1

PART II

THE INSANE ROOT 43

PART III

ILL WEEDS GROW APACE 151

PART IV

BASCIANTE 253

PART I

MARY SMITH

MR. BRYANT'S MISTAKE

CHAPTER I

When a man performs, and that with a willing mind and a generous glow in his soul, a magnanimous action which is above the level of his habit, various reflections arise in the mind of a spectator. He considers whether it is the man's best self which has done the deed; and this suggests the further inquiry whether one's best self is one's real self. The enthusiast will answer the question affirmatively, and it may be with justice. There is so much misfortune in all wrong-doing! so much unwillingness and coercion and extraneous influence of every kind! Let the man for once have fair play, a free field, and no favour—let him be *himself*, in short—and behold the magnanimous action. The soberer critic will find more fruit in the inquiry, What effect does the unwonted generosity have on the man's after life? Is it

sanctifying and ennobling, lifting his subsequent ideals into harmony with it? or does it become to him a blunder and a disaster,—a tone which he cannot silence, but which is discordant with the unpretentious melody of his career, turning the whole to failure and confusion? And if so, would the magnanimous action have better been omitted? Even if it had been the man's best self, the man's *real* self, acting perhaps for one only time in his life, that was responsible for it?

Such questions cannot be decided; they can only be discussed. At least, we perceive that people are different; and the old saying remains true in every age, that one man's meat is another man's poison.

In Mr. Bryant's case the action's motive was complicated by love. He certainly would not have done what he did, if he had not been very deeply and very sincerely in love. Love, we know, is blind, and it is quite possible that Mr. Bryant did not see at all what a magnanimous thing he was doing, nor consider the difficulty there would be in tuning the rest of his life to harmonise with it. He was a country curate, prematurely widowed. His vicar was not surprised when one day he announced very calmly that he was about to give his baby Georgina a stepmother. The vicar congratulated him, and of course asked a few particulars about the bride. She was Mrs. Grant, a fair young

widow, who for some months had been resident in the neighbourhood, but in the greatest possible retirement. And as the conversation proceeded, Mr. Bryant said further that Mrs. Grant's first marriage had been 'singularly unfortunate.' The vicar, smelling a rat, but not sufficiently intimate with his curate to care to chase it, merely inquired if he had known the lady long; and Mr. Bryant replied, Oh yes; all his life; her and all her family; in fact, had wished to marry her long ago. And he sighed and wished he had done so. The vicar said it all seemed very suitable; and concluded that his curate, who was no fool, and not quite a gentleman—son of a retired grocer, in fact, as every one was aware—knew what he was about. Yet, considering that there was some mystery about Mrs. Grant or the deceased Mr. Grant, the vicar was not altogether sorry that the wedding was postponed till Mr. Bryant had moved on to a better curacy in a dull part of London; where no one happened to inquire into the young couple's previous history, or to realise that they were only just married, and that the baby was Mrs. Bryant's stepdaughter; or to discover that the gentle, girlish creature had herself been married before, and had a little child of her own, living for the present with an aunt at Faverton Farm, far down in the country.

We go back to the day after the wedding, when the pair are sitting together in a small and incommodious sitting-room of a private hotel at Brighton. I beg you to observe that Edward Bryant is a most worthy and conscientious clergyman, and to remember that he is very much in love with his wife. The golden-haired Emma is extremely pretty; very gentle, fragile, and obedient; a little sad too, and probably less enamoured than he.

'And now, my dearest,' Mr. Bryant was saying, holding her hand in his and playing with her thin fingers, 'I will tell you the arrangement I have made for Mary.' He stammered a little over the remark, much to his own vexation; and Mrs. Bryant started and coloured. 'You see, Emma,' he went on rather pompously, 'a clergyman's position is important. His home life and the lives of those belonging to him will be narrowly inspected: properly so.'

'Yes, Ned,' said Emma, with a little sigh, which seemed to vex him.

'My dear, it is inevitable; it is better to recognise it. There is no use in trying to deceive ourselves, or each other.' Poor Emma, who had always been in the habit of nourishing illusions, shivered. 'There is another thing,' continued her husband; 'clergymen and their wives, as a rule, belong to

the highest classes. They get a certain prestige from their birth. Now you and I, Emma, have not that advantage. Oh, it doesn't matter,' he said with some concealed irritation, answering a gentle reply of hers; 'rank is of less moment than it was. People will be civil enough to us if they see we have brains and money, and Christian principles.' He paused; put his hands in his pockets, and seemed rather embarrassed. 'All I mean is—Emma, I must speak plainly to you for once. You will trust me that I know best about the matter, as you promised, won't you? Emma, the past—entirely innocent, my poor love, on your part, beyond measure culpable on the part of others—is happily over and done with. For all our sakes, it must now be completely obliterated and forgotten.'

'Oh, Edward! how?'

'Circumstances have been kind to us, Emma. We are going among total strangers, who need never know more of you than that you are my wife. We keep silence about the rest. Even to each other. Do you see?' Emma, very pale, sat up straight, looking out at the sea; her hands motionless in her lap. Was it possible what he was saying, that the whole miserable history of her first marriage, of her credulous folly and that other's dastardly deception, could be wiped out? Could she really hold up her head again not merely as his wife, but as his

untainted, unsuspected wife, who would excite neither remark, pity, nor censure?

'Ned,' said Emma, clasping her hands and looking up in his eyes, 'you are forgetting the child. Ned, Ned, what do you mean? You haven't married the old Emma Randle. I wish you had! I wish you had! You have married Emma Grant—a widow. Oh, Ned! And Mary is her child. You promised you'd be good to my poor little child. It was for her sake I married you!' The last words were impulsive and not meant for him. He frowned lightly.

'Yes, dear, yes. What you suggest might be possible if we were persons of the rank to which the clergy usually belong. Persons of that rank are above suspicion. But a farmer's daughter will be scrutinised, you may be sure; and a grocer's son might be supposed less particular on certain points than the son of a marquis. We should be asked questions about your late husband. There would be gossip. The matter would come out. How could we make your perfect simplicity and innocence understood, my poor love? Emma, you must guess what the unkind world would say. It would ruin your comfort—our whole career. No, my love, we are going among strangers. Silence is possible, and silence is best.'

'But, Edward—the child! Unless you mean,' said the young wife timidly, 'that she is to think you are her real own papa.'

The clergyman started up and walked to the window, for Emma had made him angry. 'My dear,' he said, gently but firmly, 'I promised to provide for that poor child's welfare—for her food, her keep, schooling, a future provision,—all she can reasonably require, but I cannot undertake to adopt her as my daughter, nor—at present—to have her in my house.'

'Oh, Edward, you promised!' she sobbed, going to him and drawing his arm round her; 'oh, you cannot be so cruel!'

'No, I didn't promise that, my love. Listen now. Your brother is going to keep her. Sarah wishes it. She is the same age as little Nannie, you know, and they will grow up as twins. Sarah has arranged a parentage for her which has been already accepted. Not a soul at Faverton knows she has anything to do with you, or is surprised by her presence at the farm; I have already handed them a fine lump of money for her. Smith,—that is the name they have given her; daughter of your cousin Matilda, whom Sarah knew so well in service. Mrs. Smith, you know, is dead. It is all arranged and accepted, Emma. It is best in every way not to reopen the question.'

'But it is not true!' said the astounded Emma.

'My dearest, this little girl's presence in the world at all will necessitate some economy of the truth.'

'Let me have her, Edward, and call her Smith!'

'My love, it is out of the question. The secret

would leak out. Besides, she will be infinitely happier in your brother's sphere than in the higher one we should have to drag her into, where, if by some chance her birth was discovered, it would be terrible for you and for herself. Now she will have a happy home, a twin sister, and an undisputed position, all without injuring or defrauding any one.'

'I am defrauded,' said Emma, with simple dignity, quite unexpected from her. 'She is my child, and you are going to rob me of her.' There was further argument, and I am sorry to say they grew rather angry with each other, and I think with justice on both sides.

But of course Emma eventually submitted. Her nature was not one to be victorious in combats. She had all her life been in the habit of obedience—obedience generally, alas! to the wrong person. And when she had got herself into such a dreadful position, Emma felt that to refuse obedience to one so nobly generous as Mr. Bryant was impossible for more reasons than that he had a strong will and she a weak one. Besides, a conspiracy had been formed against Emma. Mr. Bryant's plan about Mary had been designed a good many months ago, in concert with his brother-in-law, who cared more for saving the reputation of his highly respectable family than for anything else. The infant had been taken from its mother at once; it had seemed to her as difficult to recover posses-

sion of it as to steal the little Nannie, who was Sarah Randle's own. Emma had believed that Edward would establish her claim to the mythical Mrs. Smith's baby. He refused: how could *she* set about it, who was by nature destitute of courage and who always did what she was told? Of course she submitted; and her husband was kind and caressing; and promised she should visit Mary whenever she chose, and talk about her as much as ever she liked, provided always she called her Mary Smith. But the infant was hardly ever mentioned. Instinct kept Emma silent. She felt that in her husband's love and pity there was little sympathy:—little comprehension of her mere maternal longing; none of the feebly regretful tenderness with which she still looked back on a dream, true while it had lasted, and from which the awakening alone had been bitter.

For poor Emma had loved, not wisely, nor even nobly, but too well; and she had entirely believed at the time, and, to Mr. Grant's own astonished embarrassment, would have believed to the end, that the silly formality with which he had beguiled her was a legal marriage, to be kept secret because he was a gentleman and she only a farmer's daughter; and for the three or four months that he had been with her, she had been blissfully, radiantly happy. Then he had gone away, and very soon afterwards came the news that he had been drowned on his way to

America. A lawyer had come to tell her about it, and had explained to her with brutal plainness her real position. He had put her in possession of the money—no very great sum—which Mr. Grant had left her; and the whole episode was ended. Emma, worse than widowed, had fled weeping to her brothers; who were furious of course, though they helped and protected her to the best of their ability; and by ingenious disguises, subterfuges, and feigned names they saved her reputation better than she had thought possible or even desirable. But Mr. Bryant alone was kind to her, and did not temper his advice and assistance with scolding. Long ago, when he had been only an aspiring and scholarly young grocer with a speculative father, she had disdained his pretensions to her hand. But the tables were turned now, and though she was not in love with him, nor pretended to be so, it did not take much persuading to induce her to accept the love and protection, the haven of rest and restoration to respectability, which he offered her.

Mr. Bryant was soon as happy as a victorious man has a right to be. He became immersed in sermons and in parish work; while Emma did her somewhat unsuccessful best in the Sunday School, and tried to like the vicar's wife, and the genteel persons whom she occasionally met at the vicar's dinner-table. She was very kind to little Georgie,

and only cried for her own banished baby in private. Unfortunately, Mr. Bryant surprised her at that amusement once or twice. Emma, though good and dutiful, and always sweet and dear, had never been *quite* the same since he had refused to bring Mary home. Mr. Bryant was victorious and happy; but always there was in his mind a secret misgiving about that superfluous infant.

CHAPTER II

'WHEN Emma's wed to the parson she'll be an object of pride to the family after all,' said Ann Randle, wife of Jim, to Sarah, wife of Benjamin, as she put the stranger child to bed; for the Jim Randles were poor, and Ann was glad to help her sister-in-law in nursery and household matters, 'for a consideration.'

But Sarah, who had once been maid to Lady Katharine Leicester, and was the pink of propriety, answered sternly, 'Nor me, nor Ben, we'll never boast not of Emma for none of her qualities, not if she got to be queen of the country. And, to tell you the truth, Ann, in confidence, Ben can't abide that there Ned Bryant, and if he marries Emma, you and me'll have to manage so they shan't be coming here often and reminding us of all this

bother like Emma does; and stirring Ben's bile up like Ned Bryant can't help doing; and taking airs upon themselves like Emma has tried once or twice with me already, as if she were gentry, and not a scum as I wouldn't touch my dress upon, if it weren't for the family credit.'

'Yo're 'ard upon Emma,' said Ann; 'if you'd been brought up like Emma was, and mey too, with no good mother to teach you your dooty, maybey you'd have blundered too, and folks 'ud have called you a scum. Though maybey your moderate face might have saved *you*. It isn't every young woman with looks as can bring themselves up respectable as I have done; and Emma wasn't never so clever as some. A motherless girl 'ud need have every advantage if she's to keep straight.'

About two months after the Bryant marriage, however, it was decided that a family meeting must be held to admit Edward Bryant as brother-in-law, and to reinstate Emma in some sort of favour. No one looked forward to the event with any pleasure, except Ann, who loved scenes; and poor Emma herself, who was to see her child, almost literally for the first time.

And what a dull, stiff, awkward dinner it proved at the farmhouse! The women were, it cannot be denied, a little awed by Emma's elegant clothes and the refined manner she was acquiring. But her

brothers did not seem to have anything to say, and Mr. Bryant sat silent and ill at ease, as he was apt to feel nowadays when thrown back into vulgar society. And Sarah, who was anxious to scold, reproved Emma for not having brought Georgina.

'A stepmother had ought to be so careful,' said the farmer's wife; 'the servants 'ill be setting her mind against you if you deny her innocent pleasures because she'd be a trouble to you.'

'Oh no, no trouble,' said Emma, who had left the child at home by her husband's wish.

'My dear, what's the good of saying that? Don't I know other folk's children is bound to be a trouble?' said Sarah; and Ann cried out—

'La, sister, how stoopid you are!' but not before Emma's sad heart had exclaimed silently, 'They think my Mary a trouble.'

'Mayn't I see the children, Sarah?' asked Emma tremulously, meaning of course one child only: Mary Smith, who was a trouble.

The elder scions of the farmer's family were produced, boys and girls of various ages, all with hair beautifully oiled and new clothes. Emma admired them and wished they would not stare so, and Mr. Bryant gave them sixpences. And then every one felt uncomfortable, when, in a very low tone, Emma asked for the little ones.

'Ann took the little ones up to her house for

me,' said Sarah; 'if you like, Emma, you can walk up. I thought maybe they'd vex Mr. Bryant with crying.' The allusion seemed too pointed, and Emma turned scarlet as she asked nervously—

'How far is it, Ann?' for by this time it was raining and she was looking wofully tired.

'About a mile and a quarter over the fields; but they are awful muddy for sidespring boots like yours.'

'Oh, Ann, I don't believe I *can* do it!' cried the poor mother, bursting into tears; 'whatever did you take her away there for?'

Sarah saw the grand brother-in-law's involuntary frown at Emma's sob, and thought it necessary to recall the girl to the exigencies of her position.

'We didn't suppose as Mr. Bryant would care about seeing Matilda Smith's orphan,' she said severely; and when Mr. Bryant frowned again at her tasteless stupidity, she thought he was frowning at Emma.

'Matilda Smith!' cried the outraged mother, indignant through her tears. Then she appealed to her husband. 'Ned, won't *you* speak up for me? Won't you tell them they must bring my baby for me to see?'

Terrible! Every one shuddered. The secret they had all guarded so religiously was obviously not to be trusted with her. And there was

that precocious little Alick, Ann's eldest, who looked all eyes, listening with all his might, and staring and wondering, and treasuring it all up in his clever little mind! But Mr. Bryant's chivalry was equal to the occasion. He would not reproach her *now;* and snubbing Sarah was pleasant.

'I will walk over with you, my love,' he said kindly, taking her hand; 'a mile and a half is not far. Don't cry, my dearest; don't cry.' So the husband and wife went together and Emma was comforted. Dear Edward was still the only person who was kind to her. Surely some day he would let her bring the poor innocent child home, away from these women who thought her a trouble! Mr. Bryant was certainly making no resolve of the sort.

Sarah's baby and 'Matilda Smith's' could have passed very well for twins; they were not unlike, and Nannie Randle, though three weeks the elder, was the smaller child of the two. Little Mary was the prettier, and Emma, divining her own by instinct, darted at her at once and hugged her to her defrauded bosom. No, she had never kissed Georgina like that. Edward Bryant noticed the difference at once; an insane jealousy of the child possessed him. Emma would never be wholly his while the creature lived; no, though she bore him children and clasped them to her breast with that smile she could never bend on Georgina. Good heavens!

could it be possible that she might never love his children so much as this wretched fatherless babe? It needed all his self-command to endure patiently the sight of his wife rocking her infant and crooning over it with all the arts which nature teaches a mother. But he managed it. He even smiled once at the child, and touched its cheek with his finger. After that it was easy to bend over his wife, the dear Emma of his love, and kiss her golden hair and dewy eyes.

'Dearest Edward!' she murmured; 'oh, you are good to me! I did not expect to be so happy to-day.'

But he was saying to himself, 'I wish to goodness I could prevent her from ever coming here again.'

Emma, however, never received reprimand for daring to use the expression 'my baby.' That Madonna look of hers had awed her husband, and the subject of the child was simply dropped as something disagreeable. Weeks passed on; Mr. Bryant did not suggest that Emma should visit Mary again; and Emma herself, though the words were for ever trembling on her tongue, lacked courage to speak the request. Mary Smith stood between them like a spectre. Emma was becoming miserable under the conviction that she was neglecting her poor child, and Mr. Bryant was ill at ease, and could not see her caressing Georgina without reading a

reproach in her wistful tenderness. He began to wish he had arranged matters differently, but it would not be easy to make changes now; and indulged repugnance to speaking of the infant had deepened, it seemed, into sheer impossibility.

One day a letter came to Emma from her old home. It was in Ann's sprawling and ill-spelt writing, and on the outside was scribbled, 'Burn this for infection.' What a mysterious and alarming direction! Mr. Bryant was always tempted to have the first reading of Emma's letters; he continually dreaded for her some agitation about Mary Smith. To-day he broke the seal.

'My dearest Sister-in-law—I hope this finds you well, has it leaves mey. They have illness at the Farm. I'm going to nurse the children and shan't come home for a while, being its scarlet, and Alick mustn't get it. He's an ailing body. Sarah is dreadful bad and two of the children. Maybe it's Mary. I'll nurse her like my own. Good-bye my dear. I'm fond of Mary.—Your loving Ann.'

Mr. Bryant heard Emma descending the staircase leading Georgie by the hand. How pretty they looked as they came in! A lady surely and a lady's child. The ill-spelt scrawl from the loving sister Ann annoyed him. He thrust it into his breast-

pocket to think it over. Oh, that child! that child!

It crossed Mr. Bryant's mind that if the fever were to remove Mary Smith, it might be release from a good deal of embarrassment. But no! that was an un-Christian thought. To desire any one's death was, according to New Testament principles, to be a murderer. Mr. Bryant conjured a prayer to his lips that the wicked thought, and all other wicked thoughts, might be cast out of his heart. I hope it is understood that Mr. Bryant was no sinner. He was only trying to act with prudence. He never even economised the truth unless it was necessary. If he were trying to gather figs off thistles he was not the first, nor will he be the last, who has devoted much energy to that seldom profitable branch of agriculture. And this morning Mr. Bryant soon felt more cheerful. For though he had read and concealed the letter by a sudden impulse, he could now see it had been inspiration. For of course he must consider his wife's welfare. She must on no account, in her present delicate health, go near infection; she must be spared anxiety if possible. He would himself go down and see how the case really stood with Mary Smith.

When Mr. Bryant arrived at Faverton, the farmhouse was in a state of sad confusion, for Mrs. Randle was the person who usually kept everything

going. The clergyman was received in the spirit of the remark, 'To see the nakedness of the land ye are come.'

'You'd best go and feed at the public,' growled the farmer, who sat in the corner, his head buried in his hands and much depressed by the doctor's unfavourable opinion of his wife; 'we ain't got nothing here fit for a genelman.'

Mr. Bryant answered temperately that he had not come for dinner.

'Then I'd like to know what you have come for?' shouted Randle; and for the life of him Mr. Bryant could not at once begin about Mary, but made supererogatory inquiries for Sarah, which irritated his brother-in-law yet more. Happily Ann appeared, and averted further quarrelling.

A clever, fluent woman was Ann Randle, and very anxious to prove her own importance. Indeed she had attained to a higher position in the family than was warranted by her mere marriage with Jim, who had picked her up (and been called a fool for his pains) in a fishing village of the next county, whither he had been sent by Sir Charles Leicester on a mission to his property there. Ann was delighted to see Mr. Bryant; as yet she had not had direct dealing with him, and she was anxious he should not regard her as a cipher.

She sent the farmer to his wife, and bade her own husband get out to his work; then sat down to cold beef and beer, and begged the unwilling clergyman to join her.

'I am afraid poor Emma was much topsy-turvied by my letter,' said Mrs. Jim. Mr. Bryant drew a chair to the table and sat down by the important woman's side.

'To tell the truth, Ann, Emma has not yet seen your letter. When I understood what serious news it contained, I dreaded its effect upon her, and wished to spare her all needless anxiety. I trust that poor child is recovering.' It was disconcerting to the correct Mr. Bryant that Ann Randle put her elbows on the table, leaned over as close as possible to him, stared at him hard, and then winked. He looked away from such vulgar conduct. Then Ann pulled a long face, cast her eyes up to heaven, nodded twice or thrice, and said with a sigh—

'Mary Smith, that desolate orphan in what we are all interested, is very ill; and her cousin Nannie too. I'm a plain-spoken woman, Mr. Bryant,' she went on, 'and I never find it prospers to be anything else. When Jim asked me to marry him, "Ann," says he, "will you have me?"—"Jim," says I, "I'll have you; for you comes to mey spaking the truth, and that is what I like. You ain't

rich and you ain't so clever as some, and I don't say I'd be spaking the truth if I called you handsome; but I believe you are honest, and the truth is all I care for." I'm a very truthful woman, Mr. Bryant, and I take it convenient when folks spake the truth to mey.'

'Quite so,' replied Mr. Bryant, wondering why she winked at him again.

Then Ann leaned forward and whispered with awful solemnity, 'Mr. Edward Bryant, sir, is it truth to say you *hope* Mary Smith is better?'

Mr. Bryant quite jumped. But he answered calmly, 'I do not desire suffering for the innocent child, Mrs. Randle.' Ann nodded and sighed again.

'Poor Mary's a cumbrance,' she said, 'and that's the plain truth. "Jim," says I, "mark my words; Sarah will feel that babe a cumbrance."—"So would yo, Ann," says he. "No," says I; "my mother's heart is large enough for the stranger. I'm an exceptionable woman; but Sarah will want to be rid of her in six months."'

'Do you mean,' asked Mr. Bryant in some anxiety, 'that Ben and Sarah are repenting of their engagement?'

'I heard 'em saying not once nor twice lately, and not jesting neither,—you ask 'em yourself, Mr. Bryant,—"Emma 'll have to take the child herself, and we'll give parson back his money."'

'Out of the question,' said the clergyman, calmly.

'I'm sorry for Mary to feel a cumbrance,' observed Ann.

'Perhaps *you* want the money? You can arrange that with Sarah if you choose. I don't care a straw which of you keeps the child, so she is properly cared for.'

'Ay, money 'd be a convenience to mey,' said Ann Randle, 'but law, Jim wouldn't do with the child. She's a cumbrance to Sarah, and to mey, and most of all to you, Mr. Bryant, if we spake gospel truth for once in our lives.' He shrugged his shoulders wearily.

'Well, we have to put up with many encumbrances. I think I have materially lightened this one for the child's foster parents.'

'Maybey she'll die of the fever,' said Ann.

'That is as God pleases.'

'I say, if I'm to spake the truth, Mr. Bryant, I hope she may. So you say too, I suppose, when *yo* spake the truth.'

'It is as God pleases,' repeated Mr. Bryant, annoyed and rising.

'She's very ill,' continued Ann; 'Mary Smith is *very* ill. The doctor he says Nannie may recover, but the adopted child with her weak constitootion is like to die. His orders is strict, Mr. Bryant,—very fast orders; hard to carry out when the nurse

volertory and unpaid too, has three patients at once. Mary Smith the orphan is the worst of the three. Sarah may get up again after weeks of illness. Nannie may be crowing in a fortnight, but I doubt that after a scrap of carelessness, a haccident with me, a lateness in giving medicine, or such like, Mary Smith's spirit will go to join her poor mother Matilda in heaven.'

Mr. Bryant, standing with his back to the woman, was trembling all over, and cold beads of perspiration hung on his forehead. It was one of the most terrible moments of his life; for with all his horror at the suggestion, as he imagined Ann intended it, he could not help feeling that the consummation were one devoutly to be wished. He turned round and faced his sister-in-law, his face ghastly and his lips twitching.

'You are a wicked woman, Ann Randle. God forgive you. Let me hear not one other word in this strain, if you do not wish to bring a curse upon us all.' But he had misunderstood her. Ann stared at him in astonishment; then uttered a cry of horror, backing from him in disgust.

'In God's name, Mr. Bryant, whatever maggot has got into your head! Any one 'ud think you'd been wishing I'd neglect the pretty dear! Your taking me up so, Mr. Bryant, shows what has been running in *your* mind, for shame to you. Poor,

poor dear! I said right when I said she was a cumbrance.'

Mr. Bryant with a shudder sank into a chair and covered his face with his hand. In his bewilderment he really could not remember how the conversation had gone up to this point. His impression had been that Ann was suggesting her willingness (for a consideration, no doubt) to relieve him effectually of the burden of Mary Smith. But perhaps the odious thought, as she said, had been in his brain, not in hers. He remained silent, mentally and physically shaken, while this dreadful woman chattered on, positively chattered, over the grave of the Satanic suggestion.

'You have no understanding of the female nature, Mr. Bryant. I daresay now, if it had to be done, you could do it yourself quiet somehow and make no bones about it, like a many doctors do with badly-made infants. But a woman has to be desperate afore she could harm a pretty dear. Not Emma who bore her, nor Sarah who suckled her, nor mey who've only washed and dressed her times, we couldn't hurt Mary Smith. You'll never get one of us to help you off with your cumbrance that way, Mr. Bryant, and you needn't think it.'

'Let me see the child and go,' said Mr. Bryant, rising at last; 'I will bring Emma here. I no longer feel confidence in you.'

And then Mrs. Randle nodded her head again mysteriously, leaving her resentment; and tapping her nose, she whispered after a moment, 'Now, Mr. Bryant, if I was you, I *wouldn't* bring Emma here. If you was a clever woman like mey, and it was worth my while, maybey yo'd find a hinnicent way of doing the business, less stoopid than your manly murdering sort of notion.'

'I don't know what you mean, woman,' said the clergyman angrily; 'let me see the child and go.'

With her finger on her lip, and stepping noisily on tiptoe, Ann Randle led him through the silent house, past the room where Sarah was talking to her husband in the loud incoherence of delirium. Ghastly that grating voice sounded to Mr. Bryant's excited nerves, as it floated out on the sunny fragrance of the breeze-blown staircase, which was lighted by lattice windows, open now to the scent of jasmine and honeysuckle. He followed his guide silently to the nursery. The older children had all been turned out; only the two cradles stood there side by side, a sick baby in each. One little cot was of the *berceaunette* pattern, with white curtains of rough lace and a silk patchwork quilt; the other, a mere straw cottage affair, without drapery, and with bedclothes not at the moment very clean, and absolutely without decorations. Emma's child; Mr. Bryant felt the contrast. But

after a moment he doubted whether the difference in the cots were not after all accidental; for the flushed tossing child in the straw cradle did not look at all like the Mary Smith at the point of death whom Mr. Bryant had expected to see. On the other hand, the white, still, wasted little piece of mortality under the white curtains appeared, to Mr. Bryant's bewildered eye, unnatural, even moribund.

'Which is which?' asked the clergyman.

'Just so, sir,' replied Ann Randle; '*which is which?*'

Mr. Bryant's heart came into his mouth, and he did not repeat the question.

CHAPTER III

On their return to the parlour they met the farmer, who had descended from his wife's sick-chamber, and was much upset by grief and alarm. It was time for Mr. Bryant to return to the station, but he lingered; unaccountably, it seemed to Randle.

'The child is said to be dying,' said the clergyman, abruptly.

'Let all the children die,' returned the farmer, peevish at this interruption to his grief about Sarah.

'La!' cried Ann, 'that ain't the talk to make your wife better. You men care nought about your children. You scarce know the one from the tother.'

'What child's dying?' asked Randle, turning on her savagely.

'La now, Mr. Benjamin, do be patient. It ain't your Nannie is dying. It's the orphan, Mary Smith.'

'Let her die,' said the farmer; 'it's she has brought this curse on us.'

'Benjamin Randle,' said Mr. Bryant, stepping forward, 'I insist upon that child's being taken care of.'

The farmer brought his heavy hand on the table with a thump.

'That's what you're come about, is it, Ned Bryant? Oh ay, I took your money, so I did, and you want your money's worth, do ye?' The brat shall be nursed the same as Sarah's lass. Them's my orders, Ann, bean't they? You mind 'em, I say. But we won't have this brat bringing more fevers on us, Ned Bryant. You shall have your money back, and Emma shall have her child. She's lost me my Sarah, that's where it is. I oughtn't never have took your money, Ned Bryant. Hush money never come to no good. When the brat's well enough to move, she shall march.'

Mr. Bryant declined to discuss the matter at present. Then Ann referred again to her 'volertory and unpaid services,' and wheedled some money out of the rich brother-in-law.

'Thank you, sir. I understand you, sir. I'll do my best, I'm sure, for Mary Smith. But little babies die wonderful quick, sir. I'd like Emma to remember that,' she said, winking at him again to his keen disgust.

What had he done? Mr. Bryant made yet one more effort to reveal the plot. 'Go up, Ben, and look at those children.'

'I won't,' shouted Randle. 'My child's doing well, you say, Ann? I ain't a-going to catch a squint looking at tother.'

'What have I done, I wonder?' said Mr. Bryant to himself as he walked away. 'Ben is right; this Mary Smith has brought a curse upon us all.'

Alas, poor child! Never in those few short months of her little life called Pet, and Precious, and Sweet, and Baby; only, by every one, with full honours, as if she were some grim old maid, Mary Smith.

Mr. Bryant took his seat in the train and tried to review his position. An intense repugnance to the whole Randle family and connection was his first and most prominent feeling. Was it possible that he, with his white hands and clerical coat, had once belonged to people of that class? had spoken

with that rude vulgarity? had looked out on the world with just such self-important, unaspiring eyes?

'How fortunate that Emma is not very fond of her relations,' he thought, and reflected that there was really only one strong tie binding Emma to her old home,—a tie which seemed now about to be snapped. 'Good heavens, is it wrong of me to wish, almost to pray, that the child may indeed die?'

And then he felt a shiver run down his back. For it seemed perfectly clear to him that the babe had not been dying at all, and that if the tie were about to be snapped it would be by unlawful means.

And yet he had done nothing. He had really nothing tangible to accuse himself of. He had protested against neglect. He had paid extra for proper nursing. He had recoiled in horror from any project of hastening nature's end. Why should he blame himself for not giving voice to suspicions that really seemed grounded in nothing but fancy? That *he* was confused between the infants could astonish no one. They were rather more alike than every other two babies, and before this day he had not looked at Nannie at all, and only for five minutes at Mary Smith. If there was—a mistake between them, no reasonable person could hold him accountable. And why should he suppose there

was even going to be a mistake? Ann Randle had said nothing definite. And then Mr. Bryant asked himself, Suppose there was—a mistake—not of his making, and which he was too simple and too honest to suspect—what harm would it do? Positively none to any one. He thought hard on this point; and he could not discover any damage that would come to any one, if by any chance such an unfortunate accident as the confusing of the two children were to occur. *So long as nobody knew*, it would not matter in the least.

And then a recollection came to him of his dear wife's cry when they had talked of Mary Smith on the morrow of their wedding. 'She is *my* child. *I* should be defrauded.'

Pshaw! ridiculous, sentimental rubbish. Nothing could be more for Emma's advantage than the removal of this unfortunate, fatherless child.

But all this was absurd. It was a maggot in his brain, as Ann had expressed it. No one but himself was dreaming of such silly juggling as an attempt to change the identity of two children. In fact he was going to see that nothing of the kind could possibly be done. He would take steps. If Mary Smith died he would arrange that she should not be buried without the corpse being inspected by some one who had known the child well. He had been a fool to spend so long con-

sidering the details of any project so ridiculous. The rest of the journey should be better occupied in framing some way of breaking the sad tidings to poor dear Emma, that her unfortunate child was, according to the doctor's verdict, at the point of death. It would be great suffering for the dear loving woman who had suffered so keenly already. Mr. Bryant began to feel sorry he had such a message to deliver. Thank Heaven, he had got at last into a fairly Christian frame of mind.

CHAPTER IV

On entering, Mr. Bryant went straight to his wife.

It was a sultry afternoon, and Emma, languid all the summer, had found the close London house not a little oppressive. She sat in an arm-chair by the open window, Georgina on her knee for once, and fast asleep; her round healthy face, more highly coloured than her stepmother's, bright with sunny slumber. At first he thought Emma was asleep too, for her fair head drooped and she was very still; but she looked up as he approached, and then he saw that her soft eyes were full of tears.

'My darling, dearest Emma, what is the matter? You have been crying. What is it? Are you not well, love? Has Georgie been troublesome?'

Emma, stretching out her hands, only asked him sorrowfully where he had been.

Mr. Bryant seated himself on the sofa, drawing her to the place beside him, and keeping his arm round her.

'My dearest, I have been to Faverton.' She gave a little cry and pressed her hands to her head, looking away from him.

'I knew it, Edward.'

What could she mean? He trembled when a few moments after, stealing her hand into his and pressing her brow against his shoulder, she whispered, 'Edward, is she dead?'

'Dead? Who? My darling, what do you mean?' Then, as she looked up with a sudden light of hope, he added hastily, 'She is ill, Emma. Little Mary is ill, but——'

'I knew it, Ned,' she interrupted, hiding her face again with a groan.

'My dear child, how?' Had he left that hateful letter lying about then? What folly not to have told her of it at once!

'Edward, I have had a dreadful dream.'

'A dream? Oh, never mind dreams. Let me tell you the facts.'

'Ned, don't laugh at me, please. There is a deal of difference in dreams. I never heed them without they are of the kind one sees is something particular.

It was a dreadful dream. I fell asleep after dinner, quite unlike usual, and then I dreamed. I thought I was at home again and sitting beside my own baby's cradle. And the door opened and Death came in—oh, so cold and so horrible—and he carried my child away.'

'But, my love——'

'Oh, please, listen. I woke all of a shiver; and I thought, Edward, it was our new, our coming baby, and the reason was, it seemed said to me somehow, because I had deserted Mary; I wasn't fit to be a mother again!'

'Emma, this is quite morbid; mere imagination.'

'I thought and thought. And then I thought maybe it wasn't the new baby I saw in the dream, but Mary herself. I had been wondering all day where you had gone. And now you say—oh, Edward, please let me go and care for her at once!'

'It is certainly a curious coincidence, Emma. But Mary is not going to die. She does not look ill—not very bad. I went up to see her myself.'

'Oh, Ned, did you?' cried Emma. 'Oh, you are good! you went to see my poor little Mary!'

He kissed her affectionately. All this was surely the leading of his good angel. 'Emma, I am certain she will recover.' And he told her all, with the exception, of course, of his suspicions of Ann Randle.

In fact, all that seemed absurdity now; he was so thoroughly awake to his affection for Emma and to his duty. He repeated what he firmly believed, that her child was scarcely ill at all and would speedily recover. But Emma, frightened by her dream, was not to be so easily cheered.

'Edward,' said the poor mother, pleadingly, 'don't say no, please. I want to go to my poor, dear, little girl at once. If she dies, oh let her die in my arms. Edward, I can't bear it. When I think how I have forsaken her! Oh, God will forgive me enough to keep her alive till I come. It kills me to think how bad I have been to her.'

Mr. Bryant hesitated; but he allowed himself to be persuaded. Emma's presence would after all be the simplest way of circumventing Ann's cunning designs. And the poor sweet darling was so insistent.

So they started for Faverton, very affectionate to each other and both feeling themselves on the return to goodness from which they had wandered. Only, as a thinking human being finds it hard to remain in exactly the same state of feeling for a long while together, Mr. Bryant had not gone far ere various other moods had crept into his mind beside a mere vague desire to do all his duty and to please his dear, pathetic wife. He reflected that in her condition of weakness and distress it would be

most unwholesome for her to go near any person in a fever; then he couldn't help wishing Emma were not so convinced that Mary Smith would die. She was so prepared for the event, so almost resigned about it, that he couldn't but remember it would be undoubtedly convenient. And the only time she at all seemed to contemplate the possibility of the child's recovery she made a very awkward suggestion.

'Edward, I haven't been able to help thinking from Sarah's last letter that they are getting tired of having my Mary there. If God pardons me enough to let her live, won't you, dear, dear Edward, allow me to bring her home and care for her myself?'

Mr. Bryant was silent, and she pushed her advantage. 'Oh do, dearest Ned. It is killing me going on so. Maybe they starve and neglect her. And it is my sin. You don't wish to make me miserable, or to do what I am sure is wrong, Edward?'

'Certainly not, Emma.'

And then, wearing for a moment her girlhood's bewitching smile, she laid her hand on his and looked at him with a sparkle in her tear-stained eyes, and said, 'That maybe is a promise, Ned—dearest Ned!'

'Oh, Emma!' he said, transported; but he was

no longer in the submissive days of first love when every smile of hers was law; in five minutes he was considering how he could reduce her to reason on this point, and best avoid fulfilling the promise he had not made.

The train was very slow, and Emma, tired already, became quite worn out. She got rather hysterical when, on reaching the station at half-past nine, they found no sort of vehicle to take them the five miles to Faverton. Mr. Bryant stepped outside to see what could be done. It was now a chilly, drizzling evening. Emma would be wet through before they reached the farm, and how angry every one would be to see her, especially as she would most certainly arrive sick and miserable herself, another invalid to give trouble. 'What a mess I am making of the whole affair,' said the clergyman to himself, 'to bolster up my conscience; I have exposed *her* to all manner of risks. What is to be done?'

Just then a gig drove up to the station, and a very fussy old gentleman jumped down with a letter in his hand.

'Come now, Stationmaster, come now,' he shouted, 'this won't do, you know. I'll report you to the post-office. Here's the second time I've caught you making up your mails before the time. You shall just unseal them again.'

'If I didn't take time by the forelock, Doctor,' said the Postmaster rudely, 'I'd miss the train. Happen you didn't take time by the forelock at Randle's, and that's why you are losing your patients.'

Mr. Bryant stepped forward, his heart in his mouth. 'Excuse me, sir. I am Edward Bryant, to whom I see that letter in your hand is addressed. What news have you brought me of my sister-in-law?'

'Eh, what, what?' said the doctor, dragging the clergyman to the light and scrutinising him before handing the letter.

'They gave it me to post,' he said; 'I understand you are guardian of the child who has just died, and——'

'Died!' echoed Mr. Bryant. 'Do you mean Mary Smith?'

'Don't know her name. Heard she was an orphan—an heiress, eh? as there's such a fuss about her! Knew the moment I saw her she wouldn't recover. Puny, backward child—contrast to Mrs. Randle's baby. Fear the woman neglected her foster child. Natural enough.'

'And her own child, how is she?' asked Mr. Bryant, bewildered.

'Oh, all right. Not much the matter with her. You seem fond of babies, sir. I suppose parsons

get used to 'em baptizing 'em—pleasanter job than vaccinating, though less useful, eh? Ben Randle hasn't your enthusiasm. Wouldn't go near 'em. Don't seem to care to have the dead one buried—called it a brat.'

'It would have been better,' said Mr. Bryant, astonished by his own fluency, 'according to our first idea, to have allowed my wife to undertake the orphan. Her mother, Mrs. Smith, a most excellent woman, was a near relative of Mrs. Bryant's and an intimate friend. But as Mrs. Randle had an infant of the same age, she was considered the more suitable foster-mother for the first few months. How is Mrs. Randle?'

'Very bad. She has her sister with her.'

'Indeed. My wife has come down with me to offer assistance. Unfortunately the journey has knocked her up; and I am perplexed, finding no vehicle.'

'Take my trap—take my trap,' said the doctor.

'Thank you. To tell the truth, I am doubting if I ought to let her go farther. You say she can do nothing for her friend's child, and that Mrs. Randle has a nurse already? My wife is delicate'—and so on in praise of Emma's unselfishness and insistence on her fragility. Of course the doctor, who, even in those careless days, had some conscience about the spread of

infection, strongly recommended that neither the clergyman nor his lady should go a step nearer; and he drove off without repeating his offer of the gig.

Mr. Bryant stood irresolute. 'Mary Smith is dead,' he said to himself; and then some voice seemed to reply, 'Mary Smith is alive and a fine healthy child. It is Nannie Randle who has died, and you are going to pay that detestable woman to spread a falsehood.'

What was to be done?

And now poor Emma tottered out from the station and put her arm through his. She was very pale and quiet.

'Edward, I heard you talking to that man. I heard what he said. My dream spoke true, Edward. My poor Mary is dead.'

He kissed her. 'Dearest Emma!'

'I am quite well now, Edward. I can walk to the house. I must see her once; and then perhaps I shall be able to feel it is better God has taken her.'

'You shall go, my Emma,' he said eagerly. 'Yes, yes—we will go together, and—and—make amends,' he added vaguely, feeling about, as it were, for his good angel.

They set forth silently, arm in arm, through the drizzle.

Emma had not gone far before her tears came

again, and her limbs began to tremble. After another five minutes she stopped and drew her arm from his.

'Ned, you must go alone,' she said; 'I cannot do it. I am too tired.' Then she flung herself into his arms with a great sob.

'Ned, oh, I think my heart will break. You'll go for me, won't you, Ned, and you'll give my poor, dear, neglected darling—my little Mary—her poor mother's last kiss!'

PART II

THE INSANE ROOT

CHAPTER I

The Baroness von Rudersthal, an Englishwoman of fortune and widow of an Austrian diplomatist, about forty years of age, childless, well preserved, and handsome, had arrived in Rome for the winter, and established herself and her retinue on the first floor of the best hotel. She had an army of couriers, footmen, and waiting-women; and she had with her a young lady, sometimes described as her adopted daughter and sometimes as her companion. In point of fact the girl was a distant and obscure relation, who had lived with the Baroness from childhood, and been intended for mere servitude and company; but who had blossomed into a beauty, and by this time was a far more imposing and courted personage than her benefactress. The latter, first astonished, then displeased, was meditating desperate steps to avoid permanent deposition. To get the girl married was of course the simplest way out of the difficulty, and there never was a month in which an admirer failed to appear; but these naturally did not all mean

matrimony, and the beauty was fastidious. At twenty she was still disengaged. The Baroness, with a deep design in her head, beckoned to her from England an old suitor of her own—Lord Cookham, second of his title, a priggish gentleman, indebted for his wealth and position to a successful father of somewhat vulgar extraction. 'Precisely the person we want to show us Rome,' said the Baroness; and Lord Cookham arrived with *his* retinue, which included a physician and a naturalist, taking up his residence in the same hotel with the two magnifical ladies. Georgina thought the gentleman's coronet extremely pretty, but himself wondrous dull; and the latter opinion was fully shared by her admirer then in office, young Vincent Leicester, only son of Sir Charles Leicester of Everwell Heights in the County of X——, and of Faverton Hall in the county of W——, who had married a daughter of the Earl of Henslow, and who was related to the Baroness von Rudersthal. Vincent was the ordinary tall, healthy, young Englishman, with a somewhat lordly air, and a tendency to brush insignificant or superfluous people out of his way. He was at the age for enjoying himself; had travelled; and of late, having fallen in with his relative the Baroness, and become enamoured of Georgina Bryant, (daughter, by the way, of a parson he had once read with and liked in the long vacation), he had now followed the two ladies to Rome. For

Georgina had said to him 'No' in a 'kiss-and-come-again' sort of way, which was not very depressing to a person of courage and self-confidence; and a sort of cousinly intimacy continued between the two young people, who were very happy, not being in the condition of tumultuous passion which makes lovers sick at heart, and indeed each secretly holding the opinion that there is considerable charm in the liberty of single blessedness. All was going well till Lord Cookham, the walking guide-book, made his appearance. Georgina then began to exhibit unwonted interest in ancient monuments; and young Leicester, who had a vast contempt for my lord's modern title, his information, precision, care of his health, paltry size, baldness, and ancestral connection with trade, began to be jealous, moody, and unmanageable.

'No,' he said, 'I'll ride to-morrow. I won't go sight-seeing. Faugh, the bony smell of St. Agnese is still in my nostrils! If I were the king, I'd go out with some sealing wax and shut up the entrance to your Catacombs, till your nasty old skeletons recovered their flesh with other Christians at Doomsday. There are too many objects altogether at Rome; they have the same effect on the mind as the Book of Proverbs, which is a string of admirable sentiments and maxims, but exhibited in so disconnected a way

as to be even ludicrously unimpressive. The Government ought to remove all rubbish. What sense or beauty is there in the collection of stumps nicknamed Trajan's Forum? And those filthy old dens by the river? and half the churches? Prayer saying to the extent of those churches is out of date. Indeed great part of the town is out of date. The Pope has been pulled down, and the town must be pulled down by degrees also. Why not? Are we to stop making history in our day? Where would be the historical associations of Rome if succeeding generations had not one and all trampled on the work of the fellows before? Your favourite Antinous has lost his arms, you say? Well, what are the arms of a statue? Can't you always make new ones? The living iconoclasts, Goths or whoever they were, were worth more. You'd have been puzzled to put new arms upon *them!* No, no, Rome must not be left a mere museum for English *dilettanti*,' ended Vincent; 'it must improve like other places.'

'Improve!' a horrified echo ran round the room and the Philistine laughed himself. 'Well, it *is* improvement,' he maintained; 'all civilisation is improvement, even if it has the defects of its qualities. A king with a conscience—your popes had none, of course—is bound to go in for civilisation.'

'Dear me! have you a conscience?' whispered Georgina.

'I? Heaven forbid! A most inconvenient appendage. But then I'm not a king. If one were, upon my word, I think one would have to grow a conscience.'

At this moment a telegram was handed to Vincent Leicester. It was from his mother, announcing that Sir Charles was dangerously ill and begging her son to return to England at once.

That evening, when the Baroness asked Georgina casually whether she intended to marry Vincent Leicester, the girl replied, 'Yes, I suppose so.' For she had reflected that Sir Vincent Leicester entered into his inheritance was a different person from the boyish suitor whom she had refused but not dismissed two months ago. Had he renewed his proposals this evening she would have accepted them.

But Vincent's thoughts were all with his parents, and love-making seemed somehow a frivolity incongruous with the solemn scene being enacted by his father's bedside, and at which he longed to be present. Choosing a wife was nothing like so serious a matter as losing a father; it must wait till he had a heart at leisure to attend to it and to other pleasures. 'You will write to me, Georgina?' he said, 'and I will return as soon as I can; and then——' She knew what he meant, but it was an indefinite sort of speech, vexing to

the young lady. She consoled herself by flirting with Lord Cookham, who had such a pretty coronet, and was so wise about obelisks.

CHAPTER II

'FANCY my poor father having been at Everwell!' said Vincent; 'those people at Everwell were always wanting something, and Blake, the steward, a regular skinflint, was always deluging their requests with cold water. None of us had been there for years. I wonder what took him there now.'

'You'll have to give up wandering, settle down, and redress grievances,' said Mr. Bryant. Vincent opened his eyes.

'Who? I? Oh, I suppose Blake knows what he's about.'

They were by this time breakfasting in Vincent's smart bachelor apartments at St. James's; the very attractive-looking clergyman having met the traveller at Victoria, and given him the news that Sir Charles's sudden illness had already come to a fatal termination.

'It was like you to come and meet me,' Vincent had said rather hurriedly, putting his arm through his friend's. 'I will go on by the 11.30, but I should be glad to say a word to you first.'

Mr. Bryant had agreed readily, for he was attached to this young man of family, and had kept up a sort of desultory acquaintance with him ever since the reading party in the long vacation. Vincent too liked the clergyman, though he had rather forgotten him; and he had a new reason now for regarding his old friend with interest. Nevertheless his thoughts were too much with his dead father for him to begin to talk of Georgina at once, and for a long time he was very silent.

'You don't suppose, Mr. Bryant,' he said at last with some awkwardness, 'that Georgina would like settling down at Everwell?'

'Georgina? What do you mean?'

'Didn't she tell you?'

'My Georgina? Tell me what?'

'That,—upon my word, there wasn't much to tell,—that I want to persuade her to come to Everwell, or wherever it is, to—to be my wife, in fact,' said Vincent, with a laugh, as Mr. Bryant did not seem yet to understand.

'My dear boy, what—what an extraordinary notion!' stammered the clergyman.

'Oh, it is impossible,' he said presently, pushing his plate away with the air of a man who dares not trifle with forbidden delicacies, and rising from the table; 'quite out of the question. I sincerely hope Georgie recognised that.'

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'Georgina refused me, but I hope—I think, not finally. Why do you say it is impossible?'

'My daughter must look no higher than some poor curate,' said the clergyman.

'May I ask if you have seen Georgina lately?'

'No. I am sorry to say I have not. I have no time for long journeys myself, and her patroness is exacting and keeps Georgie close.'

'Patroness?'

'Yes. Georgie is a dependent on her. A poor relation, a companion, a sort of lady's maid, in fact,' said Mr. Bryant. Vincent stared.

'I think you had better go and see your daughter, Mr. Bryant. You don't seem to know quite the sort of person she is. She is very beautiful,' said the young man, flushing.

'That may be,' returned the clergyman calmly, but with fast growing internal excitement.

'And very—fashionable. She refused me because I wasn't smart enough. She has counts and princes about her; at this moment an English peer.'

'You are jesting.'

'An English peer at her feet. Or at the Baroness's. At first I thought she was the attraction. Her age is the more suitable. I don't see why,' said Vincent, gravely and awkwardly, 'I shouldn't run a fair chance among them all, especially if you, sir, will give me a good word.'

Mr. Bryant was silent for some time. 'No,' he said at last, 'I am glad Georgie refused you. My family is very humble, Sir Vincent, and even Georgina's mother was at one time working for her living. Your position is different. You must put it out of your head.'

Perhaps Mr. Bryant's confession of humble origin was not very emphatic; at any rate it made no impression on his hearer. It had never occurred to him that the parson was not a gentleman.

'Why, Georgina and I are almost cousins!' he protested. 'That is all nonsense, Mr. Bryant, that you are saying. My mother would be the first person to tell you so. At any rate you don't refuse your consent?'

'No, I don't go quite so far as that,' admitted Mr. Bryant, rather weakly, for he felt dazzled and confused. 'My daughter is, I regret to say, too independent of me for my interference in her choice unless on very grave grounds; questions of conduct, for instance,' he ended, firmly.

Vincent rebelled against what he fancied the sacerdotal tone of this remark. 'I must take my chance there,' he said, drily, and was near repeating that Mr. Bryant did not know his daughter. It was impossible to imagine Georgina being much interested in questions of conduct. Soon afterwards they separated.

Everwell's little gray church is on a windy hill, and not near any house. It seems just the place for the dead, where the sun at all

hours falls athwart the graves, and the far-away sea makes quiet music. 'Bury my dead out of my sight,' said Abraham; and it is best so. In a lonely place where the children will not play upon the strange grass-grown mounds, nor happy lovers stumble over some weather-beaten tombstone, which tells an unheeded record of 'William of this parish dying at seventy-three,' and Susan his wife quickly following him to the long home. Will they too, the young William and the blooming Susan of to-day, who are passing hand in hand, one day be told of just so, on a moss-grown, weather-beaten tombstone? It is a gloomy thought. Away! Bury my dead out of my sight! It is better to forget them than to have such dismal notions starting up at joyous moments, like a cold hand touching the bride at the wedding feast. So at least they had thought at Everwell; and the little church with its ever-present congregation of the dead is far away from the life of men, from the old deserted home of the Leicesters, Everwell Heights, and farther still from the rough fishing hamlet at the foot of the cliff. Sometimes along the mossy path to the church comes a sad little procession wending its way out of the world for a few moments, to leave some one in the hallowed precincts: a child perhaps in that little coffin, borne under his arm by

some tall fisherman, and followed by two young girls in white—'tis the custom at Everwell—and then by the parents and the brothers and sisters, and perhaps a grandmother labouring along, and many neighbours, all feeling the way very long, and talking to each other more than weeping, yet still in their rude way honouring that strange visitant, Death, the grisly king. It is the way with the uncivilised, a funeral is always an event. They go to church but seldom on other occasions at Everwell.

To-day poor Sir Charles is to be taken to Everwell Church and the graves of his ancestors, who for several generations now have done little for the place but be buried in it. Sir Charles has accidentally managed to die there also, and the fact has startled the people into attention.

'It is God's judgment,' said Alick Randle; and Blake called him an insolent fool; but the new Sir Vincent, who had arrived yesterday, looked at the speaker with some surprised interest, and wondered a little who he was, and what had given him such a sore feeling against poor, easy-going, good-natured Sir Charles. 'It's our way here, Sir Vincent, to carry our dead with our own hands,' said the same man; 'he was a bit hard on us, but maybe if we had been better acquainted, we might have served each other. Let him be beholden for

the last service to us, sir, and maybe you'll shake hands with us over the dead, and it'll be a beginning of better times.' Vincent looked again at the speaker, whose measured and musical voice was strangely impressive. He was a slightly-deformed, irregular-featured young man, lean and shrunken and pale, but redeemed from ugliness by a finely arched head and singularly thoughtful, luminous eyes, which always rested calmly and boldly on those of the person he was addressing. His dress was that of an upper-class workman.

'I like your plan,' said Vincent briefly; disgusting Mr. Blake, who had designed very imposing funeral arrangements indeed.

And now after a stormy night, slowly, through the stillness of a gray, cold morning, the people toiled up the steep road from the village, all subdued and startled and curious; and Alick Randle led the procession with the eight fishermen in their jerseys chosen to be the bearers, and the two young maids in white cotton dresses, white handkerchiefs crossed over their shoulders, and white sun-bonnets shading their faces, each carrying a garland of ivy twisted with stiff pinkish-white seaweed. In every funeral procession at Everwell, as far back as the memory of the oldest man could extend, there had been thus two white-robed maidens leading the mourners. No one noticed them to-day,

except Sir Vincent, who, at first annoyed by the singularity of their costume, relented on discovering that the taller of the two was extremely pretty, and moreover nearly related to the evidently important person, Alick Randle, who would certainly take offence if she were dismissed from office. So the procession all set forth together; the young heir and his weeping mother, present by her own request; and then the relations and acquaintances and servants, and then the tenants and the fishing population. And they passed along slowly, slowly, to the little graveyard gate, where the old clergyman, himself a relation of the deceased, met them and began his task. And the seaweed garlands went with the costly exotics which the heartbroken widow had ordered from a London shop; and the new young landlord and his lady mother stood among the villagers. And the eye of every one, small and great, was fixed with interest and speculation, with prejudice or affection, upon young Sir Vincent, to see what manner of man he was likely to be.

CHAPTER III

Most unnatural and tedious were to Vincent the days of gloom and ceremony which followed;

equally unpleasant the discovery that he was a much poorer man than he had ever looked to be. For he had been little at home, and was not sufficiently intimate with his parents to know that their frugality was a matter as much of necessity as of choice. 'Let the poor lad enjoy himself,' Sir Charles used to say; always inclined to apologise to Vincent for his elderly and long childless parents, who knew nothing about young people and were enamoured of comfortable dulness. Sir Charles would have gone without a coat rather than deny his son sixpence; so Vincent had not only had all he wanted for the moment, but had indulged largely in expensive castles in the air. For instance, he would get rid of his little yacht and build a bigger with all the modern improvements; he would take long voyages; do some exploring; shoot at big game. The house at Faverton should be enlarged; new stables built, for he must have an unrivalled hunting establishment. And Georgina—oh, Georgina would require a blaze of diamonds, bevies of footmen, gold dishes on her table, golden shoes on immortal horses, and a milliner's bill six miles long. There could be only one kind of life suitable to Georgina: an indoors life of much society and entertainment; a London house and a husband in Parliament. He didn't himself so greatly care for that kind of thing; which was as well, for in the middle of his

extravagant scheming he suddenly entered upon his inheritance; discovered that his father had been not only economical, but almost poor; and that if he himself were starting in life with a competence, it could prove so only by a very careful adjusting of necessities and desires. The steam yacht and the matchless hunters—they were necessities surely; as to the town house, the society, and the milliner's bills—Vincent thought it prudent in writing to Georgina to throw out a few hints about the downfall of his hopes.

'This is a frightful ramshackle old house, which has seen so much better days as to be barely respectable. *If I had only the money*, I should pull it down and build a commodious family mansion in the hollow, where the east wind would not howl in gigantic chimneys. You would agree with us in liking our nice little modern Faverton Hall much better. At least it does not *look* so poverty-struck and importunate. There I had always a feeling of wealth, which I hope belongs to the walls and the atmosphere, and is no doubt as comforting as reality.' Vincent was no great scribe, and not even a love-letter appeared to come natural to him. However, he thought these hints rather neat, and had no suspicion of the very ugly appearance his under-lined sentence would have in Georgina's eye. The letter off his mind, he went out to see how the waves looked on a stormy night. Everwell

was not a nice place; it was even more gaunt and dilapidated and unfriendly than he had expected; but as he was here for the nonce he might as well see it thoroughly, and make acquaintance with a few of its surly inhabitants. After all they were 'his own people,' and his family had roots here as it had not at 'nice little Faverton.' And then it occurred to him that that pretty girl, Alick Randle's sixteen-year-old sister, looked the pleasantest of 'his own people,' and he would like to see her again.

Taking pleasure in the storm, which seemed harmonious to his discontented mood, Vincent was soon on the shore; and there he found a group of people gazing apathetically at one of the so-called 'big boäts,' which had no business to be putting into Everwell at all in such weather, and was consequently now entangled in the waves and the sunken rocks, in what seemed a perfectly hopeless manner. The boat indeed upset just as Vincent reached the group of spectators, who edged away from him in sulky aversion; and then these people all heaved a sigh of relief as at the ending of a show, and one man moved away homewards, uttering the opinion of the rest, 'Sarves them fools right.'

Vincent, full of wrath, seized him by the shoulders, and turned him round again, 'You are not going to let those men drown within a stone's throw of land and not raise a finger to help them?'

he said. Who could have supposed adventures so ready to hand at Everwell? Vincent organised and led a singularly unwilling rescue party, which detested him for his interference, but were awed into submission when they found what a strong oar he could pull, and how little he heeded opposition whether of waves or men. He got a swim too,—a plunge into the boiling waters after one feeble old fisherman who had been unable to retain his hold of the floating spars till the rescue coble had arrived, and who, unconscious, dead almost, had drifted away into a whirlpool, where no boat could follow. Everwell in its boldest flights of imagination had not conceived that swimming could be brought to such a pass of effectiveness.

'Seems a chap what knows summat of the sey,' said one of the fisherman, jerking his thumb at Sir Vincent, who, having shipped his prize, was now sitting in the bottom of the overloaded coble and breathing hard while he tried to pull himself together during the return voyage; leaving the navigation to the men now, and listening with some amusement and some disgust to the remarks on his performance.

But what applause does hero value save applause from the eyes of beauty? Alick Randle had all through been Sir Vincent's able lieutenant on land; but when the hero leaped on shore again, it was to find the man attended now by the dear little

girl, Nannie, his sweet-faced sister, who was waiting meekly with a store of blankets and brandy and other restoratives for the ill-fated mariners. Vincent quite lost his hold on present emergencies when he met the admiring gaze of those lovely eyes. He looked at Nannie more earnestly than even her admiration justified, and Alick conceived a distinct annoyance, and taking the blankets from the girl, he sent her a little roughly away.

Vincent found that he had a great deal to think about that evening; so much that Georgina Bryant was very nearly forgotten, and the decay of his brilliant designs for spending his imaginary patrimony. His thoughts went wandering round and round these points. First, 'his own people' were craven, sordid, unadventurous souls. Secondly, Alick Randle was a queer, good sort of chap, who might want setting down. Thirdly, that was a very unusually pretty girl, and he must see her again. And so on, the third reflection coming up twice, perhaps, for one appearance of the others; till he slept the sleep of the just, when the just is young and pretty thoroughly weary.

The boatwreck had undoubtedly increased Sir Vincent's interest in Everwell; he would acquaint himself with the place before settling down in his home at Faverton; already he fancied a shade less aversion in the stare with which the people

greeted him when he made his appearance in the village next day. Here he caught sight of Alick mounting the steep, dirty street from the beach to the higher part of the hamlet, and curiosity set him to follow that queer chap. If he knew where Alick lived, he would know where his pretty sister lived, a quest that really seemed important enough to justify the expenditure of an hour or two. When Alick came to the wooden bridge across the Beck, at this hour abandoned to the brown fishing nets, hung upon it to dry, he stopped and whistled, and presently who should appear but the fair Nannie herself. She wore a blue petticoat, displaying trim ankles and little feet cased in clumsy shoes; a white apron and a lilac sun-bonnet. Beneath the latter peeped out delicate rings of—alas! red hair. Her clothes—the costume of the place—were all so clean and fresh that she gave a faint idea of masquerading; her slight figure was elastic and graceful, and she walked upright, carrying a basket upon her head. Alick, it seemed, disapproved of this, and lifted it off; then a soft laugh broke on the air and the two stood together talking on the bridge, their figures reflected on the smooth, tide-swollen streamlet. Vincent was hidden in the shadow, and finding himself unobserved, he paused observant. Alick showed the girl some money, and they laughed about it—at least Nannie laughed;

Alick seemed a grave person. Then he separated one coin from the rest and gave it to her. She appeared to expostulate, and the man said a little impatiently, 'No, Nannie, it ain't over-much. The tenth is the Bible proportion.' She shook her pretty head and looked up at him with veneration. Then they separated after some further disputing and laughing about the basket; Nannie gaining her point and marching off triumphantly with it planted upon her bonnet and held on by her hand, while she peeped over her shoulder at the retreating Alick, who had been forced at last into a smile. Any dispassionate person ought to have perceived some sort of sweethearting in all this. But Vincent had an *idée fixe*. He had decided in his own mind, and did not propose to reopen the question, that this damsel was the ugly little hunchback's sister. He could have declared that Alick himself had furnished him with the information.

Sir Vincent emerged out of the shadow as Nannie passed him, and she made a curtsey and blushed very much, remembering in what a silly way she had been behaving. Now Nannie's blush was an extremely delicate and pretty one.

'I hope you didn't catch cold last night?' inquired Sir Vincent, with a wild desire to say something.

'Oh, sir,' said Nannie softly, getting still rosier, 'it

was you—you we hoped that for! Oh, sir, we felt so proud of you!'

Vincent laughed and wanted to stay talking to her. But he had discerned his uncle Frederick Kane coming round the point, and felt a need of brevity.

'Are you going to look at the sea?'

'No, sir, I haven't time to-night,' said Nannie.

'You go sometimes then?'

'Yes, I like to get far out on the scar and watch the waves,' she replied; and Vincent suggested to himself that some evening he too would go and see how the waves looked from the scar.

'Good-bye,' he said, raising his hat, as if she had been a lady, and Nannie blushed, curtseyed, and went on her way. After a time he ventured a glance. Nannie was surveying a stout woman in front of her and had stopped, shading her eyes from the sea sparkle with one hand, while the other steadied the basket. That pretty attitude showed her rounded figure to much advantage, and the young man watched her till she had moved out of his sight.

Well, that interesting episode was over: what next? Vincent strode after Alick, and caught him up on the road above the village, just where was the baker's shop and post-office, and behind it the wide valley leading to a farm long unlet. On

the other side of the way was a quaint little house painted pink, with a very overhanging roof of red and weather-beaten tiles. The back windows looked down into the sea, though between the house and the actual precipice a narrow path from the village climbed up, to meet the road a few yards farther on. This house, liable, one would think, to be swept away bodily by a storm, was chiefly remarkable for its front garden, where grew rows of odd little half-dead plants, all carefully labelled and divided from each other by minute stone walls. Grubbing in this garden was an elderly, ragged-haired man, in his shirt-sleeves, and by his side an old lady in a short skirt, a man's coat, and a felt hat, who through two pair of spectacles was examining a dried—a very much dried—fish. About the whole premises was a subtle odour of things strange, aromatic, pungent, withered, and nasty.

'Sir, that is Dr. Verrill,' explained Alick, gravely; 'if you'll come in he'll be pleased to make your knowledge.' To which Vincent, in search of amusement, agreed; the more readily that he had observed another person, already known to him, sauntering round the garden and occasionally stopping to kneel before one of the plants and examine it with short-sighted eyes. This gentleman carried two long pins, each with a buzzing fly impaled upon it; and

he was habited in black, being Sir Vincent's cousin, the Rev. Henry Septimius Leicester.

'Oh, Alick!' cried the doctor, jumping up, 'you are late; the light is declining. Quick, show me what you have brought, and get to work. The blossom will not last till to-morrow. How do you do, sir? I'll attend to you in a moment, but the claims of science are imperative.'

The intruder bowed, and looked on while Alick unfolded a roll of paper, displaying a large and effective water-colour drawing of a plant with glossy leaves and small purple flowers. In addition to the main picture were separate and colossal representations of a single leaf, a seed, etc., from the same plant, with a long description underneath in illuminated writing, the whole thing framed by a running pattern border about an inch wide, also painted and designed from the same flower.

The parson and the old lady with the fish knelt before this production, while Alick crouched behind holding it open, and Vincent stood beside him, much inclined to laugh. The doctor unceremoniously removed one pair of spectacles from the old lady's nose and transferred them to his own; then he produced a withered leaf from his pocket and compared it with the depicted one, shaking his head; then with compasses measured the distance

between the leaf joint and the calyx, and nodded; then began to read aloud the botanical dissertation, explaining the detail of the plant.

'My brother is writing a book,' whispered the old lady to the stranger, 'and this is one of the illustrations. Alick has finished four of them. He is likely to be a great painter. The book is on Vegetarianism and the culture of edible herbs. The most original portion will deal with the subject of Fungus. That is a very beautiful specimen you smell from the rockery. It is *Polypore Merisma Sulfureus*, and has been used heretofore as a physic for dogs. But we dined off it yesterday, and found it made an admirable pie, from which neither of us have experienced further ill effects than a slight sensation of nausea at the moment of eating, which can be obviated on the next occasion by doubling the flavouring of allspice and marjoram.'

The Rev. Septimius now spoke. 'Your handling of the brush is improved, Alick. You do me as your master credit. The border design is good. It should be adaptable for the wall-paper I wish you to design for my bedroom.'

'Alick,' said the doctor, 'allow Sir Vincent to take your place. The light is changing. Get to your work at once.'

'But the fungus, brother?' cried the lady; 'can we ensure so perfect a specimen again?' The

smell from the rockery, be it observed, was not pleasant.

Alick rose to his feet, folded his arms, and spoke in a slow, distinct utterance, unexpectedly interesting. 'Excuse me, miss; I never engaged to draw that stinking stuff from life. Sir, you'll have to make the wall-paper yourself; and doctor, begging your humble pardon, I am going to waste no more time on this work.'

'Mercenary!' said Dr. Verrill, unmoved.

'Mercenary!' cried the young man. 'Sir, I'd have taken the same pains for no money at all, if it had been a work I could see a blessing in. It might have been a blessing to set folk eating fruits God made for their good, which are cheap to be got and easy to grow, and can be kept down without allspice and marjoram. We've had nothing of that sort yet. And you'll drive 'em meat-devouring again, with the stench of your polypore pies, and poison a few, who don't digest so easy as you; just as Sir Vincent here is giving some of 'em typhus and setting the most of 'em gin-drinking by kneading their bread with the sea, and boiling their broth in the beck, which is the common wash-tub and the common sewer.'

Vincent raised his eyebrows. Then Alick, producing the gold coins which he had shown Nannie on the bridge, turned again to Dr. Verrill. 'I have kept on with the painting, doctor, because

you had paid me beforehand for a dozen. That was in the days before I was regenerate——'

'Tut,' said the clergyman.

'And maybe it was no more sin to me than any of my other filthy rags. I have kept at it against my conscience this many a day, because I couldn't give you the moneys back. To-night I have them, and I hand them to you now, sir, and pray you to deliver me from a bondage which has grown to me a bondage to the devil.'

Upon this the old lady sprang to her feet, and shaking her stick at the recusant, cried in cracked and trembling tones, 'Young man, it's the devil has taken possession of your soul. You have inherited a talent from your grandfather, who painted the family portraits at the Heights'—(Vincent shuddered: that very morning he had condemned to the stake certain villainous representations of his progenitors painted by a local artist, and hung up beside the three Vandycks and half-dozen Sir Joshuas, deservedly prized by the family)—'which with cultivation might make you the head of what they call the Academy in London; and you are deliberately thwarting your Maker's intentions, and what is worse, you are thwarting the intentions of my brother's Maker also. What value will there be in his book without the plates? And to what purpose have we spent years in the cultivation of these

delicate vegetables if the world is not to reap the fruit of our experiments?'

'Miss,' replied Alick, firmly, 'if you come to the purposes of the holy Maker, I would have you know He never meant them flowers to grow at Everwell. It's a sin to murder 'em; and it's a sin to go lusting after and tasting the strange meats you make pies of, which was given for a curse upon the ground and a punishment to man, as it's plain to be seen from their unclean juices and abominable stinks. No, sir, I ain't a meat-eater myself; but I've read in my Bible as the kingdom of heaven is not meat and drink; and I will spend no more holy hours fiddling and faddling, and altering, and copying, and spoiling, what at best is a question of meats and drinks, and has nothing to say to righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.'

'Then you can begin the wall-paper at once,' said the Rev. Septimius.

'Oh ay, the wall-paper!' retorted Alick, turning on him; 'it's fitting, is it, as God's minister should be spending his days thinking on wall-papers when the flock is starving around him for soul-bread, forgetting the very sound of God's name except in their curses, and losing their hope and their happiness, and their manliness, and their health in the dregs of Satan's vice. That's none of his business, I suppose? Look here, Mr. Leicester,

Dick Boulter's lass drowned herself a fortnight agone, or maybe Dick drowned her; or her lover; either of 'em, one's as bad as the tother, and the place is handy for drowning folk. You didn't know it. You don't care now you do know it. There's a many wenches in the place as stained as that one, and there's a many lads as wicked and murderous as Dick, and you know nought about 'em. You are thinking of your wall-papers.'

'Come,' interposed Vincent, 'this is none of your business anyhow.'

'No, sir, it's none of my business, that's just it. It's the minister's business; but because he don't do it, it lays heavy on my heart, and I can get no rest night nor day for thinking of the uncared-for wickedness of the men and women I live among, who have no one to say to 'em, "Turn ye, turn ye, why will ye die?"' There was a short silence, while the earnest melancholy voice still seemed to ring in the ears of the hearers. Septimius alone was unmoved; he had caught an earwig, and was trying to fix it under his pocket microscope.

Just then Alick happened to look away in the direction of the post-office, and he saw a stout, respectably-dressed woman, leading a child, issue from it with a savings bank book in her hand. His whole countenance changed; breaking from the group and bounding over the gate, he confronted

the woman, the same person, as Vincent now perceived, who had been watched by pretty Nannie. When Alick appeared in this sudden manner, she screamed, and dropping her book, began to run as fast as fat, ageing, and rather tipsy legs would let her. Alick caught her by the arm and let her talk unanswered, while he picked up the book and examined it. Then he dragged her back to the post-office. After a few minutes the man returned to the botanical garden; he was pale now and greatly subdued.

'I'll do you the red flower, doctor, and maybe a few more of 'em. Seems I can't pay back the money yet. Maybe I never shall.'

'I don't want your money, boy,' said the little doctor, angrily. 'Your mother seems to have a use for it—you'd better keep it for her.'

'It ain't for her I'd keep it back, sir,' said Alick, 'but for the little uns. We've saved up, father and me, for years for 'em—schooling and leather and tidy gowns for the lasses. She's muddled most of it away. I suppose I'll do you the dozen, doctor, like I undertook.'

'We might petition the doctor,' said Vincent, 'that the polypore should not be one of them.' Then Alick went away, leading the now tearful woman and the frightened child; and Vincent asked his kinsman what sort of a chap this Alick really was.

'Oh, daft,' answered the clergyman, 'quite daft, poor fellow. Harmless so long as he isn't contradicted.'

'Quite daft,' sighed Miss Verrill; 'if it were not so, he might be a great painter.'

'Quite daft,' echoed the doctor; 'wastes his time psalm-singing when he might be an apostle of vegetarianism.'

Vincent glanced from one to the other of the three, and wondered if daftness were in the Everwell air. Perhaps among his other vegetables the doctor had grown the 'insane root which takes the reason prisoner.'

'Does he belong to the place?'

'Yes; at least has been here from a child. The mother (fine, healthy, clever woman, drinks her gin with a stomach might digest my new antidote perfectly) was born and bred here. Some land-lubbing chap married her and took her off for a year or two. But she came back a widow, and married Leach. He was a poor chap without a liver, but a better workman than Alick, who is a Jack-of-all-trades; and they held their heads high till Leach died, and Alick took a liking for prayers and his mother for gin.'

'I think the girl told me she came from Faverton?' said Vincent.

Dr. Verrill came up very close, and holding the

tortoiseshell spectacles to his eyes, stared through them at the young man with an annihilating sneer. 'I never heard of Faverton,' he said in a tone of the profoundest contempt.

CHAPTER IV

DECIDEDLY Everwell was getting interesting.

The next day was Sunday, and Mr. Kane, Lady Katharine's brother, who said he liked inspecting his fellows, went to church. Vincent contented himself with a view of the congregation as it came up from the village. He was looking for Nannie of course, and presently she came, following the widow Leach; hanging on Alick's arm and surrounded by boys and girls of all ages. She was well guarded; no chance of a word with her. But Sir Vincent smiled, and Nannie flushed as she dropped her curtsy. How much did Alick see of all that, and why did Sir Vincent think so much about it afterwards? 'I begin to think,' he said to himself, 'that I have eaten of the insane root too.'

At luncheon Mr. Kane would talk of the Leach family, and the beauty of the red-haired girl. This gentleman took a malicious pleasure in making people uncomfortable, and pursued the subject chiefly be-

cause he detected in his nephew a slight impatience of it. Vincent was ready to fling his uncle under the table; but he began to wish most heartily that he had gone to church himself, and had not left the pretty creature to the stare of only those irreverent eyes. In the afternoon he shut himself up in the library and nursed an ill-humour. Was he going to relapse into boredness then? Heaven forbid! He studied the ordnance map and the plans of his estate. He wished himself at Faverton, or elk-hunting in Sweden, or love-making in Rome. He frowned discontentedly over Georgina's last letter. He had nothing to do; if he went out there was nowhere to go. There was not a horse in the stable fit to ride; not a soul in the place fit to speak to. His mother, dear and honoured, was still absorbed in her grief. His uncle he detested. Dr. Verrill was a buffoon; Septimius a fool; Alick Randle a Methodist.

Vincent thought of the illustrations for the vegetarian's great book, and wondered if Alick were an embryo artist. Dr. Verrill had called him a Jack-of-all-trades; that was the usual profession of a genius who had not hit upon his vocation. Why didn't some one snatch him from Methodism and have him taught to paint? Why didn't his friends who believed in him, subscribe and send him to London? 'Three years in a drawing-school,

how much would it cost?' said Vincent, still extravagant in his schemes; 'he might excel his grandfather, I do think. Shouldn't be surprised if I did that myself after three years' instruction. Nannie wouldn't want to go and live with him in London, I suppose?' Then he remembered there are trains to London, and that one can visit one's friends there with much less conspicuousness than in a small place like Everwell. Vincent looked round, half expecting to see his uncle; that suggestion must surely have come from him. But instead there entered to him Alick Randle in person, and Sir Vincent jumped up, feeling guilty, he knew not why.

Alick had a glass of water in his hand: very yellow and muddy it looked. 'It's from the beck, sir,' he explained; 'I brought it to show you.'

Vincent, much oppressed, held it up critically to the light, smelt it, frowned at it; tried to look wise and decently interested.

'Taste it, sir,' pursued Alick; 'it ain't so nasty as Miss Verrill's fungus.'

'Your comparison,' said Vincent, setting the glass down, 'has destroyed the little relish I had. Perhaps the people here like a flavour in their drink? They don't *all* get typhoid, I suppose?'

'You are mortal afraid of typhus, sir, if you won't take one sup of what your folk drink by

the gallon,' returned Alick, severely, having no mind to the sin of flippancy.

'I am mortal afraid of a bad taste,' said Vincent; 'pray, do you drink it yourself?'

'No, sir, not as a habit. And I've been down with a fever once or twice. But if I was you, and my people had no better, I'd at least take my share for once. Did you never hear of David, sir, and the cup of fresh water he poured on the ground, when it was brought from the well of Bethlehem for him?'

'The essence of those pretty stories,' said the gentleman, blandly, 'evaporates when they are imitated. I'll send a specimen to an analyst if you like, and I will investigate the cause of the beck's evil smell, and the reason why the girls can't dip their pails higher up the stream. All that might be of some use. If I drink this, it will only be to please you: by gratifying your lust for revenge, I suppose.' And with a wry face, and a laughing eye fixed on the oddity, he swallowed the potion. Sir Vincent's laughing eye was not a thing Alick understood. Still there was some subtle attraction for him about his young landlord which kept him hopeful. Vincent, too, liked Alick; and after listening to some preliminary abuse of Septimius, allowed himself to be taken out to see the condition of the parish on a Sabbath afternoon,—clear proof of neglect on the part of its spiritual head.

'An expedition of a piece with your glass of dirty water, I suppose?' said Vincent, rising, and glad of something to do.

'Sir,' said his guide, reprovingly, 'you'll please not to come laughing.'

'I don't see why you look down on your neighbours so much,' said Vincent, as they went out; 'I grant you they seem rather a rough lot, and a bit wanting in spirit, one or two of them. But a man who takes his life in his hand and spends his days in incessant toil may, I think, be quite as pretty a fellow as you or I, who sit at home thinking.'

Alick thought he discerned a tendency to perfunctoriness. He replied eagerly—

'Ay, sir, yon's the conclusion a fine gentleman, who has a grand house, and the world's love, and a flesh diet, and wine maybe, comes to naturally. You don't know nought about the poor, and you've a good heart, and you think: "Oh, poor chaps, they're worse off than me, and God ought to judge 'em easier. They get along wonderful considering their odds, and I won't notice their sins too much. Give 'em some beer." That's what *you* say. Blake now, he don't notice nothing but their sins. You'd think they was devils, not men, to hear him talk. But neither the one nor the tother of you think it's *your* business. But it is, sir; it's *your* business, and

you'll have to give an account of it some day,' ended Alick, impressively.

He led the way from one den to another of that excessively dirty village,—dirtier, both actually and metaphorically, than it had any right to be on that fair hillside, away from the seething corruptions of great cities, where the power of the strong redoubles the weakness of the weak. The new landlord saw bare walls and gaping roofs, haunts of fever and sinks of vice,—all very terrible to Alick Randle's heated imagination. Alick was stung by the bad name Everwell had acquired on the coast, and wore magnifying glasses when he looked at the evils round his home,—dirt and rags, starvation and much disease, free love, fighting; cursing, and endless drink. With an air of melancholy triumph he led his landlord from gloomy hole to noisome corner, and could not imagine what the man was made of that he inspected it all with an air of mere curiosity and of almost amused toleration.

'I have seen many strange races,' he said, lighting a cigar, 'and here I have found one barbarous and heathen people more.'

'Sir! sir!' ejaculated the carpenter.

'It is all like Miss Verrill's polypore pie. *I* don't want to eat it, but it amuses me immensely that any one should be found to prefer that flavour.'

'Sir! sir!' cried Alick again, 'if these are your

thoughts, all my hopes are vain, and you'll only be one evil-doer in Everwell the more.'

'Evil-doer? Oh, humbug. Live and let live, that's my plan.'

'But it's your own property, sir,' cried Alick.

'Yes, yes,' returned Vincent, impatiently; 'don't you see I haven't looked into the matter, and I don't know what to think of it? It's only fools who talk and act when they don't understand.'

And he strode on again, wishing to get rid of the importunate Alick, and saying to himself, 'Everwell is a pigsty; but Cookham and Company bid one before all things preserve ancient monuments. And what can any one do without money?'

'Look there, sir!' said Alick, interrupting his meditations. A barrow laden with pig-wash and the refuse of herrings was toiling up the steep lane, and drawn by a starved and dying donkey, flogged unmercifully by one of the lean, large-headed failures of children, only just clever enough to guide the creature's steps. Blood poured from the beast's bony sides, and he shook in every limb, while still the blows and accompanying curses fell fast and thick. 'Look there, sir!' said Alick, in whose eyes shone a sort of wild delight that the white-handed gentleman should see the sordid exhibition. Vincent watched without sign of emotion. The beast, patient, uncomplaining, doing his best, made one

superasinine struggle, slipped and fell—to rise no more. A barrel rolled from the rickety cart, and poured out its unsavoury contents. The boy uttered a yell of dismay; then with the butt end of the whip would have struck the dying brute across the eyes, but that Vincent, without a word, knocked the weapon up with that elegant little cane of his, at which Alick had been inwardly railing, as of a piece with the cigar and the general indifference.

On one side of the street was the beer-house; at this moment there reeled out of it a drunken man, his step guided by a slattern, just one degree soberer. She laughed at the prostrate animal and the terrified child. But the man, after a stupid gaze, seemed to recognise with sobering effect that the cart and the donkey and the boy belonged to himself. He broke from the woman, and rushing forward, seized the child by the hair, and snatching the whip, mid a volley of execrations, beat him, as he himself had beaten the dying animal. The boy screamed, then turned white and sick and silent. The woman laughed again.

Vincent intervened now, delivered the child, and handed him to Alick. In an instant, like flies round a carcass, the people in the drinking shop and from the doorsteps had gathered round their landlord with undisguised hostility in word and look. Vincent folded his arms and stood in the

middle of the group, looking from one to the other, his lip curling, ready to defend himself and the boy and the dead donkey if need be. The crowd in their drunken state had lost any awe they might naturally feel for their landlord, and remembered only that he had 'come interfering,' and that they hated all gentlefolks, and this one and his fathers in particular; nevertheless he had settled the boy's tyrant in a manner that made no one very anxious to be the first assailant. 'Well?' said the gentleman at last, 'may I ask what you want?'

So far Alick, very much astonished by his apathetic scholar's leap into action, had merely watched the progress of events. He advanced now with the intention of making his well-known and authoritative voice heard. But he was prevented. A big young fellow, who seemed at once more sober and more fierce than the rest, and on whom Vincent had been keeping his eye, suddenly faced round and dealt Alick, who was thin and weak and familiar, the blow in the face which he had feared to give the gentleman. Vincent, his eye flashing, cleared himself a passage through the crowd and felled the assailant. There was a little movement among the spectators, which told they could understand and reverence strength of limb if nothing else. Vincent laughed. 'You think I am going to beat you? I see your ears going back like a whipped spaniel. I

do not strike a man when he is down. You shall get up presently; and then you shall apologise to Alick Randle, or, by Heaven, I will take you by the collar and march you off myself to the nearest police station and give you in charge for assault.'

And then an old man, who was very drunk, chimed in with language so unsavoury that one of the women begged Alick's intervention.

'Stop that!' said Vincent; and as the offence was repeated, ordered two of the bystanders, whom he remembered having conquered on the boat-wreck night, to remove the offender. There was a moment's hesitation, followed by obedience, and Vincent threw a reassuring smile at Alick, who was looking quite bewildered and alarmed.

Vincent now allowed his victim to rise, and bid him go and ask Mr. Randle's pardon, which was done; while the gentleman, brushing the dust from his sleeve, stood in the middle of the crowd, afraid of him now. He then made a speech—the last thing he had intended to do.

'Now listen. I hope that is the last time I shall have to play policeman to my own people. You have seen I can strike, and you have seen the kind of thing I strike for. Take care how you provoke me again. Now I should like to shake hands with each one of you. I am a human being too,' said Vincent, with a smile; 'what is there in

my appearance to warrant these scowls you treat me to? Come, let us all drink each other's healths before we part——'

But here Alick Randle interrupted. 'No, sir, there's been a deal too much drinking already; I hope you'll set your face against that. We'll have no drinking of healths to-night, if you please, sir.'

After handing magnificently a large coin to the boy of the donkey, Vincent retired with Alick, the crowd watching them silently as long as they were in sight.

'Sir, sir,' said the reformer in a tone of distress, 'I doubt it was the old Adam brought your fists out so lightly.'

For all his impatience with Alick, Vincent Leicester had not despised that excursion. He was silent and moody all the evening, perhaps feeling growing pains. That tiresome old question was forcing itself on his notice, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' I suppose it was something to do with this question that set him, after this studying to Lady Katharine's awe, horrible tomes on political economy, land improvement, the laws of property, and the investment of money. He frowned, and bit his nails over them, and grew surly; and his gentle mother took them in horror. But he persevered. He conversed also much with Blake, who was repugnant to him, but had good knowledge of

business; and with Mr. Kane, who could discuss a theory far more ingeniously than his nephew; and always much with Alick, who knew the place, was perfectly definite in his views, and impressed Vincent a great deal more than either the one or the other knew. And the son was deaf to all Lady Katharine's hints that he had been long enough now at Everwell, and would be able to settle his affairs far more comfortably 'at home.' It was all rather wearisome; but Vincent Leicester had begun to grow, and was sending down roots slender enough as yet, but which were taking hold of the ground here in Everwell. It was not a kindly soil, and you are not to expect that the first green upward shoots will be very straight, or very robust, or very fair.

CHAPTER V

GARDANTE, Parlante, Jocante, the first three of those gallant six whom Britomart disarmed and took into her service;—Vincent Leicester had not as yet come to fair fight with any but Number One, that 'jolly person and of comely vew,' whom he now claimed as his liegeman and turned to account whenever opportunity served. Rising one morning more than usually bold and for adventure athirst,

he resolved to challenge and disarm Parlante, the stout knight who now headed the defence of Castle Joyeous. Jocante would stand or fall with his brother; but far be it from me to hint that Sir Vincent had any designs for to-day against the fourth great champion; he who did himself even to Britomart 'most courteous shew,' and who therefore hides in the background till his time for action comes, and dislikes all braying of trumpets, concourse of spectators, empty parade, and haste alarming and unseemly. Yet is he a highly formidable personage, and had Vincent been aware that he also would have to be encountered, he might have thought twice before engaging with the less redoubtable brethren. But what young and venturesome knight, yearning 'to prove his puissance in battell brave,' was ever renowned for foresight and caution? He saw the dim, mist-encircled form of Castle Joyeous before him, and he had a fancy for Parlante as a liegeman. Armed with spear and shield, he mounted his steed and addressed himself to battle.

Which is to say, that one day Sir Vincent Leicester called at Mrs. Leach's house with its little shop and decent parlour; asking indeed for his friend Alick the carpenter (whom he guessed to be absent), but with the intent to have not only a comfortable look at, but a comfortable talk to, the beautiful Nannie. The Leaches, of course, pertained to the highest

Everwell society, Alick being the only member of the family who mixed with the seafarers, and that as a missionary. Mrs. Leach, at home, was so tidy and respectable that Vincent did not for a moment recognise the woman he had seen with Alick in disgrace at the post-office; the inevitable Jimmy was pulling at her gown, and the neat, bright little parlour seemed to the inexperienced visitor crammed with children of all ages. Nevertheless he noted at once that Nannie sat by the window near the linnet and the row of flower-pots, reading a book. Mrs. Leach was voluble, and chattered a great lamentation over her eldest son when Vincent asked for him.

'Dear, dear, the trouble we have had all our lives with that poor boy. You see, sir, with poor folk like we it makes a difference if a man can't work hard, and him often requiring the doctor too. La now, sir, you thought he was rich with all those workmen? that's the way poor Alick takes people in. It ain't *in* him to be quite truthful like his mother. Alick keeps half those lads out of charity; and among 'em they about do the work and earn the wage of one good workman like my poor second husband, gone to glory with my first one. I don't like to say it to Alick, sir; it hurts his feelings, but what with his weakness and his head, and all he gives to the missionaries, we're getting poorer and poorer, so my husbands would weep in their graves

to see us. My poor Leach did most of the handy work of the place, but Alick, what with his health, couldn't keep his stepfather's customers. There's Henderson, Blake employs him, and John Lamprey, Mr. Sandford's got to think a deal of him. "Mother," says Alick, "it's spite against me, I do believe," for we are pious people, sir, such as never was pleasing in the world, like the Bible says. But I don't like to answer him, "My poor lad, it may be spite, and it may be piety, and it may be as you're a born hartist (which he is, sir) like your grandfather, but it's your head as well." He ain't *fond* of work, sir, that's where it is. Only this morning I heard him say of a new linen cupboard for Mrs. Sandford, as it was "soulless." That's a bad word, sir, for a man to use about his business.'

Vincent had heard one phrase in ten. He was looking at Nannie.

All this time she had sat with eyes bent demurely on her book; but a smile was growing on her lips, which the visitor rashly surmised to have some connection with his presence. It was really caused, however, by admiration of Mrs. Leach's exaggeration, and a fear that the gentleman was credulous. 'Alick's fond of that word "soulless,"' she said, suddenly, raising her charming face and looking at Sir Vincent; 'he doesn't mean no harm by it!' Vincent crossed to her end of the room at once.

At this moment Mr. Sandford himself came into the shop, to whom went Mrs. Leach. Jimmy, having strayed out of the room, tumbled downstairs and set up a howl, the bigger children ran to his assistance, and Nannie was left alone with the gentleman, and the baby, who was too small to be abandoned. Could Fortune have been kinder? Vincent was so pleased that it was some moments before he remembered even to speak.

'I suppose Alick does whatever you tell him?' he said at last.

'I, sir?'

'Yes; he couldn't refuse *you* anything.'

The girl, evidently unused to this tone, raised two wondering eyes to his; she said gravely, 'Sir?

Vincent had been marvelling at her hair already, which was soft and shining and curly; not carroty in the least, but of that rare dark red the shadows of which have a hint of purple; now he saw with fresh delight what indeed he already knew, that her eyes were not gray like Alick's, but of the real dark blue which most kittens and babies lose at a month old; under dark lashes and very fine, arched eyebrows. That grave little reply gave him a sense of having said something stupid, and he changed his tone, and asked her what she was reading so diligently. He had expected some flimsy romance or collection of hymns, accordant with the family piety.

But the cream-coloured pamphlet proved to be nothing less than a number of Mr. Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera.*

'We got it from the pedlar,' explained Nannie apologetically, in answer to Vincent's surprise. 'Alick thought we ought to read it, because it's written to the workmen of Great Britain. Alick thought it would be tracts which would do to lend about. But Mr. Ruskin doesn't seem quite a tract writer. Alick doesn't believe he knows anything about workmen!' she ended, indignantly.

'Isn't it rather dull reading for you?' asked Vincent, smiling at her confidentially, for he remembered that first smile of hers, and saw a quaint, slightly humorous expression about the corners of her pretty mouth, which pleased him.

'Oh no, sir! I like it because it seems all about a different kind of life than ours. There are some such pretty lines here by a Mr. Pope about some horses who wouldn't go any farther because their master was dead, but grew like monuments on a hero's grave. I liked that.'

'I will lend you that book of Mr. Pope's. You will find some pretty stories in it,' said Vincent.

'Oh, thank you!' cried Nannie, clasping her hands in an ecstasy.

There was a silence, and Vincent was much afraid she was going to run away after the stout mother. 'Show me some of Alick's drawings,' he

said, desperately. 'Miss Verrill says he ought not to be a workman but a painter.'

'Oh!' cried Nannie, jumping up, for he had hit upon an exciting subject, 'that is what Alick used to wish—wish—till he made himself sick with wishing! Now he has taken to believe it idle and idolatrous, but I know—I *know* he will never be happy till he does that and nothing else.'

'What! flowers for Dr. Verrill?'

'Oh no! His other pictures are *much* more beautiful.' There was a case of Alick's productions under the little sofa, and so built in with irrelevant and cumbrous articles that Vincent had to assist in getting it out, which brought their two heads very near together for a moment, and the exertion made the young girl very becomingly rosy.

'Are they not *very* beautiful?' cried Nannie reverentially, her eyes glowing as she handed one picture after another to the visitor.

And Vincent was really interested, not only by the intrinsic merit of the sketches, but because they gave a regular biography of the artist, the point of Alick's 'conversion' being plainly marked. The drawings of earlier date than that event were studies as of one seriously desiring progress; bits of flowers, or waves or buildings, hands or feet, ears or noses, evidently sketched from life and repeated again and again in the pursuit of perfection; then came a few

rough compositions on brown paper or old cardboard, —mostly scenes of men drinking, fighting, and such like, familiar enough at Everwell. But the drawings executed after he became 'serious' were either practical designs for decoration or painstaking illustrations of the Bible, the expressions of the faces treated with exaggerated care, and the moral of the particular scene depicted brought into high relief, and generally written as well on a scroll in some one's hand, or appearing in flame, on sky or wall, in the words of a text. There was considerable merit in the execution, and a sort of gloomy poetry in the designs, which had some of the impressiveness of the village reformer's earnest, melancholy voice.

'Are they not *very* beautiful?' cried Nannie; and Vincent, after an amazed silence, for he had not expected much from the drawings, and had only asked for them as an excuse for lingering with the pretty show-woman, replied—

'I am no judge, but certainly they do seem to me—talented. Quite as clever as your grandfather's, for instance,' he added, with a smile.

'Do you *really* think so?' cried the radiant Nannie, breathlessly. 'Oh, do let me run down to the workshop and make Alick come up.'

'No, no, wait,' said Vincent in dismay, choosing two of the larger pictures and laying them aside. 'May I buy these, do you think?' he asked.

'Oh no, sir,' said Nannie; 'at least, I mean you must ask Alick.'

'If you can keep a secret,' said Vincent, 'I will tell you why I want them.'

Nannie, much excited, stood with locked hands and sparkling eyes fixed on his. Vincent was thinking a great deal more of her than of what he was saying; this device of the pictures had answered beautifully; it had induced a positive intimacy. 'I might perhaps find some way of assisting Alick to become a painter,' said Vincent. 'But first I must be quite sure he is clever enough to succeed; to make a living by it; do you see? If you will lend me these I will send them to a friend who is a good judge, and who will advise me.'

'Oh, sir, yes! Please take them! Oh, you are good!' cried Nannie, putting them into his hands eagerly. Vincent caught her fingers and imprisoned them for a moment. His heart was beating with unwonted excitement—not at all about Alick.

'Now mind, not one word to any one,' he said. 'And I will bring you Mr. Pope's story-book. Shall I find you at home any time?'

'Yes, sir, generally at this time,' said Nannie, 'unless when I go down on the shore.'

Vincent remembered how he had thought of a stroll on the shore some afternoon too, and flushed a little, with a momentary idea of asking

her to meet him there. But one of the children came in and pulled the girl's sleeve, and said—

'Nannie, mother's gone out,' which made her for some reason look rather uneasy and impatient, so that Vincent, sorely tempted to stay, judged it her wish that he should take his leave; and did so, without remembering to give any message for Alick that would account for his visit.

'She is pretty enough for anything,' said Vincent to himself.

On entering, he went straight to the library, and found a small copy of Mr. Pope's pretty poem; he thought of taking it to her at once, but reflected that Alick would probably be home by this time, and much in the way. 'He would tell her it was wicked heathen stuff,' said Vincent to himself. 'I suppose she wouldn't go down on the scar so late as this? Shall I just wander round on the chance? No, I have an impression that I had better not. I will take the book when I return the drawings, as I told her. What an inspiration that matter of the drawings was!' Vincent put the book in his pocket and carried it about till the presentation day came. Still he felt rather oppressed by his rash promises about Alick. Going into the drawing-room he threw the specimen pictures on the table for criticism. Lady Katharine, thinking they were her son's own doing, praised them extravagantly,

and Mr. Kane, who knew something of drawing, as he did of most things, was a good deal impressed, even when he heard they were Alick Randle's. Vincent was in high good humour with himself and everybody; charmed his mother (who was generally rather afraid of him), and went about whistling and putting various things to rights, which till to-night had been to him mere sources of disgust and boredom. He also wrote to Georgina quite an amusing letter about his shipwreck adventure, Dr. Verrill and the great work on vegetables, the deformed genius who thought himself a missionary, and the preposterously dirty village. Naturally, however, he made no allusion to the girl with the red hair. And, puzzled what to do with the drawings, he sent them to Georgina to show Lord Cookham, who set up to be a connoisseur and a patron of needy artists, and was the nearest approach to a painter among the acquaintances of Vincent Leicester, the Philistine. On the morrow he went up for a few days to town.

CHAPTER VI

When Alick Randle came in from his work he found Nannie walking up and down the room trying to still the baby, who was crying for his mother,

while the boys were clamouring for supper and quarrelling with Sally and Liz, unskilfully preparing it. Alick listened to the noise for a minute, looking as if his head would burst; then went into the yard to wash his hands, calling Nannie to him and bidding her leave the screamer with Sally.

'I'm bound to tell you all the troubles, Nan,' he said, with a sad smile; 'here's Tom been getting into scrapes again; and I find mother's drawn out nigh all the savings, and has a bill to the butcher as well. She'll have us to the poorhouse some day.'

'The butcher's me!' cried Nannie gaily; 'I cost you a lot! I'm too hungry. Wouldn't you like me to go away home?'

'Lass,' cried Alick, 'if you go we'll be ruined outright.'

'Maybe father would send some money for my butcher,' suggested Nannie.

'Don't go asking him. He might bid you back, and I ain't an innkeeper.'

'Then we must eat herrings like the other folk here. You may talk for a week, Alick, but you'll never get me to believe it's good religion to waste what's good food, when it's dead already. If I were a herring I'd a deal sooner be eaten after I'm dead by a nice clean man, than gobbled up alive by a dirty whale. Herrings are nigh as nourishing as mutton, which is dear as well as murderous;

and a deal solider, and cheaper too than cauliflower.'

'I never said it was downright wicked, Nan,' said Alick, catching her infectious smile; 'it don't agree with me, that's all. But I'd rather we all eat mutton every day of our lives than have you go away from us, Nannie.'

'Didn't I come here because I *liked* it, Alick?' said the girl. It was true, thought this last visit to Everwell had not been without its anxieties. Formerly she had been treated like a little queen, when her daintiness had come as a favour to visit dear, loving, funny Aunt Leach. But this time Alick had brought her to make herself useful, at the time when his stepfather's slow disease had worn out his wife's patience, so that she had to console herself with gin; and the children were too young to be any good; and Alick himself had as much as he could manage in trying to keep Leach's business together; and money was getting scarce, and it was beginning to be said that 'they boasting folk of Leaches was no different in ways or in luck from their neighbours.' Nannie, not particularly happy in her home at Faverton, where no one treated her with any distinction at all, never refused her cousin Alick; so she had come to Everwell for an indefinite stay; and at sixteen had been introduced to the cares and anxieties of at least other people's lives.

'Alick,' said Nannie, rather nervously, 'I don't want to vex you, lad, but she's gone out.' He turned on her sharply, and she began to explain hastily: 'Sir Vincent was here, Alick, and I——'

'Sir Vincent here?' interrupted Alick; 'what call had he to come here, I'd like to know?'

'He was looking for you. Oh, Alick, how nice he is! What's the matter, lad?'

'*I* never asked him here. Well, go on.'

'He was talking to me. He promised to bring me a book. Aunt went away and then——'

'Mother went away and left him with you?'

'Yes, Jimmy was crying or something. I didn't notice. And then she slipped out, and I didn't know for a long time; not till the gentleman was gone.'

Alick took the girl by the arms and turned her round to look at her face.

'For a long time? What did the gentleman talk about, eh?'

'Why I thought you liked him!' exclaimed Nannie; then she remembered her delightful secret, and hesitated and coloured. 'He talked—about you, Alick.'

He perceived her embarrassment.

Before very long Mrs. Leach came in, her face flushed, and her eyes a little blurred and wandering. But she had assumed an air of great dignity, and was bent upon proving herself a model of sobriety.

She removed her bonnet, put her cap on back to front, and taking the baby, sat down before the fire, to which she administered an unnecessary poke, explaining that she had been buying yarn from her friend Mrs. Law, whose 'chimley' clock had run down. Conversation Mrs. Leach knew was her forte, so she conversed much this evening to ensure respect; and it would have required a duller sense of humour than Nannie's not occasionally to smile at her discourse. Alick saw nothing amusing in it. He sat with frowning eyes piecing together some broken oak carving he had bought at an auction for Mr. Sandford, and Nannie, at his side, was trying to interest him in Mr. Pope's lines, quoted in the tract to workmen.

'Hold your noise,' said Alick once or twice to the clamorous children, and ordered them to bed,—a command to which they paid no attention.

'Yes, Mary Anne, my dear,' said Mrs. Leach, 'you ought to mind your brother when he speaks. I always obeyed my father when I was a girl. He was a great hartist. And *I* hadn't no good mother, Sally, when I was a girl to learn me my duty, like you have. I was telling you, Nannie, my dear, I wouldn't go with them Forrester girls, nor keep company with their brother, gin I was you.'

Neither Nannie nor Alick looked round, but they both heard this remark with great indignation.

'Robert, his name is,' continued Mrs. Leach; 'I knew his uncle—Robert Forrester he was too. That showed how I vallied my good father and minded what he said. "Ann, lass," says he, "thou must choose between me and Robert." "Father," says I, "I will kape *they*. I cannot lose my good father, not for Robert nor no one. I've minded him since I were born, and I'll mind him now." Nannie, my dear, I'd have had a good husband if I'd married Robert. And I hope you'll have the same, my dear, and a healthier man than Jim Leach or Jim Randle either, who held out a shorter time than Leach, for that matter.'

'There, go to bed, you children,' interrupted Alick angrily. 'Mother, Nannie, send 'em off, will you?'

'My dears, mind your good brother,' said Mrs. Leach, sleepily; and Nannie enforcing the command this time, the boys set off for a stroll and the girls went upstairs, leaving only Jimmy and the baby. Mrs. Leach rose to take these little ones also, but she trod upon Jimmy, who had dropped asleep on the floor; alarmed by which misadventure, she gave a great lurch and nearly threw the baby into the fire. Nannie, terrified, sprang to her assistance and conveyed away the two little things herself, Mrs. Leach giving many directions as she sank back rather suddenly into her chair.

Alick was left alone with his mother ; he pushed his work aside and came over choking with indignation.

'What do you mean, mother, by talking that rubbish to Nannie about keeping company ?'

'Eh, my poor lad, I was speaking to Sally as well, for shey's growing a big girl too, and will have to be looking about her. And Nannie's of an age now to have followers and must be taught, as she's no good mother of her own, to choose 'em out properly.'

'I won't have the word spoke to Nannie.' Mrs. Leach nodded her head.

'She'll have 'em without speaking, she will. She ain't an ugly lass. I could see the genelman thought so.'

'What gentleman ?'

'Eh ? Our own Sir Vincent. A fine handsome man hey is. I do like an 'andsome male ; I must say I do, even at my time of life. And so in course does Nannie, at hers. Maybe they've spoke to each other afore now in Faverton.'

'Did Sir Vincent make out I had asked him to come, that he forced his way in here ?' asked Alick, abruptly.

'Well, my poor lad, if hey hadn't said so, do you suppose I'd have petitioned him in ? I thought maybe he'd expressed to you an ammiration for Nannie. La now, I could see he ammired her!

I know what's what. I had a many ammirers myself. There was Robert Forrester and Ben Welby and——'

'Mother, aren't you ashamed?' cried Alick, and she returned to her muttons with hasty apology.

'Yes, yes, I remember what I was talking about. Nan looked up very pleasant at him, pretty dear, and he went away pleased, he did, a-fingering them little things she give him. I see him, I did, afore I stepped oop to Mrs. Law,' she maundered on, nodding her head mysteriously and laughing to herself. Alick, white, gasping, shook her arm roughly.

'What did Nannie give him?' he shouted. Mrs. Leach looked up terrified.

'Oh my! my! Alick, what's the matter? Don't frighten me like this. I can't abear it. Nannie, Nannie,' she called, 'come down! come to Alick! He's took with summat the matter with him!'

Nannie's light foot came flying down the steep stair as Alick dropped his mother's arm and pushed her back into the chair.

'I'm a fool to waste words on you,' he said, and meeting Nannie, he took her by the shoulders with a grasp more violent than he knew, and offensive to her.

'What did you give Sir Vincent Leicester to-day, Nannie?' he questioned

The girl remembered her promise, and she was

just enough annoyed with Alick to be glad she couldn't tell him what he wanted to know. She temporised.

'I—I didn't *give* him anything,' she stammered, with an attempt at a smile, mistaken if, by its means, she hoped to pacify her cousin. Alick let her shoulder go, and brought his hand down on her arm with a force which might have been called a blow had Nannie chosen to regard it in that light.

'It's a lie!' he said angrily, not having noticed her emphasis. Nannie shook his hand off and moved quietly nearer to her aunt.

'I don't lie, Alick. You had ought to know that by this time. I didn't *give* Sir Vincent anything, and I'm not going to tell you what I *lent* him.'

'Lent? that's worse. He means to bring it back to you, does he?'

'Ay, he'll come back,' chimed in Mrs. Leach, who had lost the thread of the argument, and was anxious to please her son by agreeing with him.

'What was it you lent him, Nannie?'

'I'm not going to tell you. Maybe you could find out if you chose. I don't see what you are in such a temper about, Alick, and I'm not going to help you out of it. Let me pass, if you please.'

Nevertheless Nannie paused at the foot of the stair, a little sorry. 'Sir Vincent will tell you him-

self, Alick, when he brings the things back,' she said.

'I won't never speak to him again,' said the man, 'a d—d scoundrel.'

'Alick! I think you are forgetting.'

'Leastways you shan't, Nan. Ay, I'll see him to-morrow and give him my mind.'

Nannie had no idea what it was all about, but she knew her cousin well and saw no good in arguing with him. She returned to the children. Then Mrs. Leach murmured sleepily, 'There ain't never no good, Alick, in impudence to gentlefolks. You lave him to Nannie and mey.'

CHAPTER VII

'To be wroth with one we love doth work like madness in the brain,' and Alick Randle had no predisposition to sanity. He was not, indeed, the man to arrive at sober views on any matter in which his feelings were concerned. That night he did not sleep.

The self-taught grandson of the local painter was born artist enough to be haunted in visible shape by scenes or faces which excited his imagination. While Nannie was repeating Mr. Pope's pretty lines about the divine horses transfixed by grief,

Alick *saw* them, and only by an effort could he rid himself of their importunate phantasms. But to-night it was no fanciful coursers of heavenly breed which forced themselves before his inward eye, torment of his solitude. He saw Nannie; child and girl; his playmate, his tyrant, his slave, his sister. Sister? No, never again. He was staring at a haunting fancy of Nannie in virginal white, but with the garland on her hair which betokened a bride, and she was leaning towards him with her sweet lips pouted for a kiss. 'She is not my sister. She is my love, my sweetheart, *my wife*.'

The idea was not new to him, but he had never faced it before. For Alick had not been clear that it would be right for him to marry. The instinct of the religious fanatic turns to celibacy as it turns to fasting. Fasting came natural to Alick; as he said naïvely, neither fish nor flesh agreed very well with him, and it was quite true that he was in a 'more compact and pious frame of mind'—'nearer to God,' as he phrased it—when his digestive apparatus did its work unobtrusively. And for long it had seemed to Alick that celibacy was to be as natural to him as a spare diet. He looked at his contemptible appearance, and reflected that he was not the man to find favour in the eyes of women. And it had appeared to Alick, as to many another, very easy and not unadvisable to renounce

the joys of Love when as yet none of the blind boy's arrows had wounded his heart. For when Alick had gone to Faverton Farm to fetch Nannie to his mother's assistance—Nannie, whom he had last seen a dear, good, clever little maid of thirteen—he had thought of her as a sister; gentler and prettier than Sally or Liz. But Nannie had not been long at Everwell, and necessarily on terms of close intimacy with her cousin, before Alick found out that a lovely girl of sixteen is not, like a child, to be quickly and comfortably disposed of as an adopted sister. He reopened that question of celibacy; prayed for guidance; began to think his view unscriptural, or himself unworthy to rank with those highest and holiest ones called to virginity, and to follow the Lamb whithersoever He went. His passion for Nannie grew, but he was only dimly conscious of it himself, and never hinted at it to any one. He was sufficiently aware of his ill-controlled nature to see that if he were not to marry the girl at once, and yet she were to remain under his mother's roof, there must be no suggestion of sweethearting between them. Yet to-night—to-night with that sweet vision of the girl with the bridal garland before his eyes, he confessed to himself that he did intend to marry her, and he saw in the vision a sign that his desire was the will of Heaven.

But suddenly as in a dream a new picture pre-

sented itself. Nannie again, but in her homely everyday frock, with her girlish figure and her red hair, sitting on a high chair by the window, Mr. Ruskin's tract in her hand, but listening playfully, joyously, to the man standing at her side, who was leaning towards her and smiling as he talked; not Alick himself, lean, crooked, undesirable; no, but strong, important, aggressive, dropped like an angel out of another sphere; Sir Vincent Leicester, whose smiling eye and jesting tongue and general deficiency of seriousness and principle had already made the evangelist very suspicious. Alick drew his breath hard as he tossed and tossed on his hard pallet; and thought of his mother's tipsy suggestions; and of Nannie's undeniable duplicity; of the once or twice Sir Vincent *rather lightly* had mentioned the fair girl; his admiring bow to her on Sunday, and her *blush* and involuntary *smile;* and so on, till he had worked himself into a fever of jealousy and suspicion.

Perhaps he fell asleep for a minute or two; at any rate another picture, dream, or waking vision possessed his eyes. It was memory this time of a veritable occurrence, a scene he himself had witnessed, and which he intended to paint some day; for a sermon, and in colours mixed in blood. Nannie did not appear in it. Dear no! There was a dark night, a tossing sea, black and mysterious; a crowd on the rock below Dr. Verrill's cottage. And in

the centre of the crowd a drowned woman—Dick Boulter's lass; murdered perhaps; by herself, it might be, or by her lover, who could tell? Ah, that pale, stiff corpse—the eyes open with the last wild look of blinding horror—the mouth open for its last despairing yell; the girl, young as Nannie, fair as she, loved as passionately! And Dick Boulter was there, looking at her; and the other lover, who had stolen her, was there; and one of them, perhaps, had been a murderer, though they would go fishing to-morrow as usual, and live side by side at Everwell still! Among such people Alick lived, tormented as a righteous soul in hell.

To-night, looking at this dark picture of his memory, he seemed to see another figure in it—a gentleman who had paused to watch and to wonder, curious, half sympathetic, half disgusted, half indifferent and apart, like a spectator at a playhouse. Sir Vincent Leicester, with his curled lip and good clothes and air of breeding and reputation, as he had worn them when the boy had beaten the starved donkey to death. And he, Alick, who had drawn the drowned woman from the waves, was hovering round now, like an evil spirit, and was confronting the heartless gentleman and asking him, 'What doest *thou* here?' And then—surely all this was mere feverish dreaming that the pictures, like dissolving views, melted thus into each other?—Dick

Boulter's rival had disappeared, and Sir Vincent was somehow in his place; and Alick was still confronting him; and the dark, soaking tresses of the lost girl were burning red before his eyes; and the large, coarse hand of Dick Boulter's lass had grown small and delicate, like—like—— and the shameful, murdered woman had taken the features of Nannie—Nannie, the fair, white, innocent bride whom Alick had joyed to see a few minutes before——

Poor Alick! I told you he had no predisposition to sanity.

A few days later, Vincent Leicester stepped out of the Tanswick station on his return from London, and as the rush of cold salt air struck him in the face, he experienced a keen joy quite new to him in a sense of coming home. He sent away the dogcart and walked to the Heights across the moor. 'I really must turn my attention to the stables,' he said, laughing to himself and watching the foolish gait of his vanishing horse. 'Could old Price be got rid of, I wonder? To abolish a horse is easy, but what does one do with an old coachman? I will turn him out to grass, hoping he is a disciple of the vegetarian doctor's, and, like Nebuchadnezzar, will thrive in a field.' His heart was thrilling with exhilaration, as he looked away over the wild hills on his left, where seemed all pleasant possibilities of untamed life, and sun, and health, and freedom; or over the

gently tossing sea, from which came murmuring music and a wooing breeze. He walked briskly on, building castles in the air, and playing with Peggy, the rough terrier, who had left the vehicle, like all dogs preferring the society of a master to that of a groom.

'Yes, this plateau,' said Vincent, 'is exactly the site for a watering-place. The railroad is convenient, the air perfect, the cliff just the right height; below, a jolly little beach for bathing. In ten years I foresee the growth of an Eastbourne or a Torquay, and I shall be a rich man. Perhaps I had better import a few Yankees who understand running up a city in an hour or two? Profit is the *raison d'être* of my town. In default of historical monuments I will have a pier, Punch and Judy, niggers, and 'Arry; a church too, with a sweet preacher to attract rich dowagers. Bryant shall be the preacher; Alick Randle shall be town architect and chief decorator. In Mrs. Leach I see mine hostess of the best hotel.' At this moment Vincent nearly fell over his kinsman the parson, who was grovelling under a furze bush. The young man begged his pardon, and hoped he had not met with an accident.

'Yes,' said Septimius, 'and a most deplorable one, though I can hardly call it an accident, when it was designed by those demoniacal boys.'

Vincent shook his stick at a pair of barelegged urchins disappearing over the precipice. 'The rudest, the most ill-conditioned, the most worthless——' continued the clergyman; 'ah, surely I caught a gleam of it under that leaf! Don't crush it, I entreat you, Sir Vincent; your knee is very large and heavy. Dear, dear! you must have concealed it afresh by your brusque movements. How provoking!'

'If I knew what I was looking for,' said Vincent, 'my zeal in the search would perhaps be more successful.' After further conversation, which proceeded with some strain, Vincent finally came away, laughing explosively now and then, but looking a little disturbed and vexed with himself.

The slipshod old gentleman who opened the door to the young master when he arrived at the Heights, was John, brother to Price, the head coachman, about to be turned out to grass; and husband to the housekeeper, a person of great dignity. John's imagination was less active than his wife's, and he could not 'walk with inward glory crowned' when the family mansion had, during Sir Charles's absenteeism, fallen into such a painful state of decay.

'It's so long since I've buttled for any one, sir,' he said this evening, 'I most forget how to do it. As you said, sir,' and he shook his long gray locks dolefully, 'you'd best look for a younger man to take my

place. I listened, sir, to you a speaking one day in the library to the honourable gentleman, and you said, "As for the servants, I must have them younger and better looking."'

'You listened, did you? Come now, John, you should have known that referred to the women.'

Vincent, with more laughter, made his way to his mother's room.

Lady Katharine was very tall, very stately, and very good. She was rather afraid of her son, and had all sorts of confused fears about him,—his health, his judgment, his habits, and his principles. It is of course needless to add that she idolised her only child, and did her very best to influence him rightly.

'Mother,' said Vincent with much gravity, 'would you or would you not describe me as a quarrelsome person?'

'You?' said the gentle lady, thunderstruck.

'Because I never can take a walk at Everwell without a quarrel. It is getting serious. Since stepping out of the train two hours ago I have had a rupture with two independent people. Now do you seriously think the fault is entirely theirs? could it by some remote chance be mine?'

'I never quarrel, Vincent,' said her ladyship.

'Precisely. I am sure John would never have suspected *you* of hankering after beauty and youth in a butler.'

'Has John given notice? Dear, dear! What would your dear father have said?' mourned the widow, who, without any admiration for John, regarded him as a sort of decree of Providence.

'And then a few minutes before, Cousin Septimius and I had a short conversation, with the result that he has resigned too.'

'Oh, my dearest Vincent! Surely you must have been rash—hasty!'

'It is precisely what I fear. But he was lying on his stomach under a bush, seeking a beetle; and when I tried to help him he complained of the size and the weight of my knees. He seemed annoyed; and moreover the beetle escaped. Then he annoyed me by swearing he abhorred every mother's son in Everwell. And after a minute he said he wished to live in Sark and would hold his living no longer. Dear mother, will you send for him to-morrow and explain that I didn't mean anything; but that I am rather afraid of beetles, and think my nerves must have been upset? Nature, I am certain, designed you for a peacemaker!'

'Pray, Vincent, be serious. Tell me, dear boy, did you say *anything* you now see cause to regret?'

'No. I hinted that he shouldn't prefer beetles to boys. But what of that? The observation may have been ill-timed, but I was bound to make it some day; these opinions, mother, cannot be hid.'

'Beetles!' ejaculated Lady Katharine, and reflected in silence. Vincent roamed about the room, straightening the pictures and blowing away the ugly housemaid's neglected dust from the window sashes.

'But what have I here?' he asked, taking up an architectural design lying on the table; 'plan of a villa in Calverley Park, Tunbridge Wells? Who has sent you this, and why? Good heavens! under what unlucky star did I rise to-day? Mother, it is impossible that you are going to resign too? Mother dear,' said Vincent, sitting down and really grave now, 'I should like to say a few things to you if I may. Since my father's death I have looked into matters a good deal, and I have come to a few conclusions which you had better know.'

'Surely, dear,' said Lady Katharine. Vincent looked rather worried, and before plunging into his subject made some unkind observations about his uncle, asking when he was going away, and announcing with commendable prudence, but some unnecessary aggressiveness, that he was resolved never under any circumstances to lend Uncle Frederick any money. The widow blushed; apologised for her brother, who was perhaps a little rapacious; and hoped anxiously that her son was not exhibiting a touch of selfishness.

'I want all my money myself,' said Vincent gloomily; and now she thought still more anxiously that he was in debt, and determined to lay every

farthing of her own at his disposal. 'My father must have told you, mother, that for a long time now our property has been too big for our money,' continued the son.

'Your dear father, Vincent, always thanked God that he had sufficient for his wants. Of course, dear—do let me say it for once—we have to regulate our wants. It was beautiful how he did that——' her voice failed her. Vincent did not reply for a minute.

'I was not so much thinking of my own wants,' he said, bluntly; 'I was thinking of this place. It has been neglected. I have made up my mind, mother, to do without, in fact to sell Faverton.'

'Vincent!'

'I cannot do justice to both places,' said Vincent, 'and you know I cannot get rid of Everwell. It was the home of my forefathers; whether I like it or not, mother, I have made up my mind to make it my home. It is not fair to grind a certain amount of income out of the place, while I spend neither money, nor time, nor interest here.'

'I am very sorry, dear, you should think it necessary to come to any such hasty resolution,' said the widow; 'when I remember your dear father's affection for Faverton, and the pleasure he took in making little alterations to improve it for you——'

'Mother,' interrupted Vincent, 'Faverton is a very nice place, but it is a luxury, a speculation. Everwell is inevitable. I must recover as much as possible of the capital that has been invested at Faverton, and that will give me something to spend here; to render this house habitable and the tenants at least decent. I can't go on taking rent from those men and leave them living like pigs. It is no wonder they detest us; which they do.' Lady Katharine sighed. It was as she had feared. Her boy was inclined to be presuming.

'If I can, I mean to make Everwell profitable,' said Vincent, more cheerfully; 'that farming land shall be improved somehow. I must run up a shooting-box or two, and let those moors every year. And I have a great project of building an inn on the point, and founding a watering-place!'

'Vincent, what desecration!'

'I am sorry you think so, mother. Can you suggest some better way of raising money? I might marry an heiress, of course,' said Vincent, laughing, 'but heiresses like spending their money on themselves, don't they? not on the dependents and barren acres of a pauper husband.' Lady Katharine looked up, seeing a gleam of hope.

'Have you been thinking of marrying, dear Vincent?' she said eagerly. It was some time before he replied.

Then, still hesitating a little, he exhibited Georgina's picture; and though he did not disclose her name, he gave such other information about the charmer as produced a most favourable impression on the gentle lady, who considered a love match like her own the most beautiful and desirable thing in the world, and was by this delightful news most wonderfully cheered and ready to forgive her son about Faverton, Septimius, John Price the butler, and everything else. But nowadays, under all his moods, Vincent felt, without knowing why, an undercurrent of discontent. As he talked of Georgina the vague despondency increased. Perhaps all men went through it when they first seriously contemplated the unknown state of marriage! perhaps every man when he had suddenly entered into his inheritance and been pitchforked out of boyish irresponsibility into the cares of middle life, felt like a voyager putting forth in the dark upon an unknown sea, unprovisioned and in a crazy boat! Vincent's heart clung to his gentle and affectionate and always reverenced mother; at least there was nothing new and strange about *her*.

'One word more, mother,' said Vincent, rising; and he leaned over her very prettily, quite reminding her of his father, and took her hand and smiled at her, much, she thought, as he might have done at the sweet unknown girl of whom he had spoken;

'this wedding is not coming off yet, and I don't like that plan of a villa in Calverley Park! Even though it is not at Faverton, I feel sure my father would like to think that for the present at any rate you were making your home with me. May we not consider that at least as decided?'

CHAPTER VIII

LET no one suppose that after one evening's excitement Alick Randle had returned to common sense. When he presented himself, however, at the Heights early on the following day, it was to learn that the gentleman had already started for the metropolis, not to return till the end of the week.

'It won't do, you know, Alick,' said John, the melancholy; 'Sir Vincent ain't a republican to be hand and glove with *you* every hour of the day. You'd best not be intertrooding so often.'

'What!' cried Alick, with the self-importance of simplicity, 'has he gone away to avoid *me?*'

'Her ladyship's at home,' said John, who had great respect for Alick, 'and the honourable gentleman, if you want to leave a message.'

'The honourable gentleman!' repeated Alick; 'I wonder if them titles is pleasing to Him who

said, "Call no man your master upon earth." I cannot bring my mouth about them till I know the men better. Is your master an honourable gentleman, John, do you think?'

'It's haraldry,' said John; 'step in and ask my Betsy. Shey's oop to it. It's a puzzle to me, a puzzle to me.'

Alick went away to begin his work breakfastless, and wet to the skin by the thick drizzle. He would speak plain to Nannie herself, and tell her that he loved her, and in honourable fashion. But Nannie baffled him by her little air of displeasure, her child-like innocence, and maiden pride. He could not get his dark suspicions of the man he distrusted into words, which instinct told him would be surely offensive to her; and instinct told him also that to press his own suit now was to meet with certain rejection, perhaps to lose her altogether. For at any moment Nannie might return to her own home in the next county; and of all things Alick dreaded that; for Sir Vincent could go to Faverton and he himself could not. So he kept silence, but all the time fire was smouldering in his breast, such as could not choose but burst into flame some day at unawares.

One evening Alick, ostensibly doing a bit of designing for the doctor's great book, had let his fingers stray into altogether amateur work, prompted

by the Father of Idleness. He was trying to draw a picture of Nannie; it would not come right; and the girl was out shopping for her aunt. He would help himself by that old forgotten sketch of her in the case. He rose to fetch it. It was gone! Alick turned the drawings over and over again, and his pale face grew paler. This was the thing that had been kept from him! The man had asked Nannie for her portrait; and she had given it to him. It was clear as daylight.

One of the children knocked something down. Lizzie struck him, and the child howled. 'Now, now, now!' cried Alick, who in his best moods had his teeth set on edge by a child's cry. 'Where's mother?'

'Gone to the beer-house,' answered little Mary Anne, when the bigger girls were going to temporise. Alick flung out after her with a mad desire tearing at his heart to join her for once in her cups, nay, to far exceed her decorous tippling in mad excess of riot. It was long before he dared to seek her in the unhallowed precincts. Was it relief or disappointment that she was not there?

CHAPTER IX

TWO LETTERS AND A SOLILOQUY

'We should certainly be most culpable, my dear Sir Vincent, if for want of patronage we allowed such unusual gifts as you have introduced to my notice to be neglected. If you have made up your mind to spend a little money on this Alexander Randle (and I, for one, can conceive no worthier expenditure of money), I shall be happy if you will allow me to double your liberality; and I will make inquiries as to the young artist's most advantageous course. London art instruction is poor; modern Italian is despicable; undoubtedly, Paris is the best field. If you have any fear that the moral influences of the place may be dangerous for a young man in Alexander Randle's position, I will make further inquiries into the conditions to which an art student is subjected in one of the admirable German studios.—Believe me, with genuine gratitude,' etc. etc. etc.

'Well, I suppose that is satisfactory; only going rather too fast for my intentions. It is decided then that Alick has genius? But fancy Cookham and me going shares in any undertaking! Had I not better unlade our student on him altogether?

Ah, here are the sketches. Now I can take them back to lovely Nannie and give her her book.

'How have I overlooked a letter from Georgina, I wonder? It is rather soon for her to write again, isn't it? Oh, I see. Also about Alick. What an important fellow he has become all of a sudden!'

'My dear cousin, put not your faith in man. If you wanted a true verdict from our artistic friend, you shouldn't have sent the silly sketches through *me*. Don't you know his lordship likes pleasing *me?* And seriously I must warn you off this country paint-brush. Are you thinking he'll be a Michael Angelo? It is a dream, sir. Your villager won't be a genius. He will probably steal your money and take to drink, and you will never hear his name without a shudder. Don't you know that I am right? For is he not your first protégé? And did any man's first protégé ever turn out well? or his second? or his third? I assure you Cookham has had scores of protégés, and as far as I can make out they *all* drink. Please, sir, you won't turn philanthropist, will you? Aunt says the species is vulgar and papa generally finds them dissenters. You surely do not believe in people? How I should laugh if any one believed in me, and yet I am a finer specimen than any protégé I ever met. What have persons with a liberal education and an open mind to do with enthusiasms? Have they not

all been found out long ago? Do pray come away from that horrible Everwell,' etc. etc. etc., ending with a hope they might soon meet again; she had a host of new friends to whom she wanted to introduce him.

'That is all very nice,' said the soliloquy. 'I suppose she means she will have me now if I like to ask her again. If our letters are to be in this vein I think I should prefer a formal and announced engagement, that these other fellows she talks of may stand out of the light. The only thing is, somehow, I don't feel as keen about it as I did.

> 'Oh heaven! were man
> But constant, he were perfect; that one error
> Fills him with faults; makes him run through all the sins.
> Inconstancy falls off ere it begins.

Well, any way I have not changed my mind. No. Have I not told mother all about it? That shows I have not changed my mind. It will be all right once I see Georgina again. She is handsomer even than Nannie, isn't she? I think I will go to Rome presently and settle it. And after dinner to-day I will carry Alick his sketches and see what Cookham and I can arrange for him. And take another peep at Nannie. Why the deuce shouldn't I?'

CHAPTER X

'Oh law, sir!' said Mrs. Leach, 'my poor lad said mey and Nannie wasn't to let you come no more.' She couldn't for the life of her remember what reason Alick had given, so when Sir Vincent asked, 'Why not?' she was driven to her usual resort of ready invention. 'Well, now, sir, there ain't no use trying to deceive you. To make a short story, my poor boy ain't right in his head to-night.'

'Bless me!' said Vincent.

'He don't read his tracks; he don't work at nothing. He don't say nothing. And we durstn't say nothing to him. He kicks the children. He flies out at his good mother and at Nannie. If you was to come in, sir, he might propose to chuck you of a heap on the fire.'

'Is *he* a teetotaler?' asked Vincent, with delicate insinuation.

'No, sir; we don't hold with teetotalers. My husbands never had the doctor out of the house after they signed the pledge. They was men wonderful like each other, sir; both named Jim; both delicate like; and both took early, one after the

tother. But we are very sober, pious people, sir. As I hope to go to heaven, I'm telling you the truth about Alick; he's an honourable young man, and a sober, and a genelmanly; but he has a shocking bad head. And that's a calamity for poor folks like we, sir; and an expense, so as sometimes, like to-night, I don't know where to turn for a sixpence. But I'm ashamed, sir, you should have found me weeping on the road about it. I'm a very feeling woman, and I weep easy may-bey.'

'Your eldest daughter must be an assistance to you,' said Vincent, moving on.

Here Mrs. Leach looked ruefully into a capacious but empty purse. 'I take it very kind of you, sir, to have noticed my eldest daughter. She lays abed at home with the headache, and I was stepping up to Dr. Verrill's to get a herb liniment for her. "Mother," she says to me, "bring me some lemons and the wing of a chicken!" The only thing she could fancy, pretty dear, and she so patient. But I ain't got the money not to buy luxuries, not even for her.'

It was weak-minded, but Vincent was so moved by the thought of the little red-haired beauty sighing at home with the headache for a bag of lemons, that he gave Mrs. Leach five shillings, and bade her call at the Heights for

some grapes. He now proposed to continue his walk, and Mrs. Leach, delighted by the donative, hurried away, after thanks rather fulsome than lengthy.

At the first corner, however, Vincent was surprised to meet the imagined eldest daughter herself, her finger on her lip, looking from the retreating Mrs. Leach to the advancing gentleman with an air of reproachful distress.

'Oh, Nannie!' he exclaimed, impulsively uttering her name; then was abashed, thinking he had been too familiar.

'Oh, what *did* you give her?' cried the girl. 'I saw you give her something! Was she asking for money? Oh, how could you do it! Think how vexed Alick will be!'

'I am very sorry,' said Vincent, smiling at her sweet indignant face; 'she told me your sister or somebody was ill——'

'Oh, stop,' cried Nannie, smiles beginning to invade her distress also. 'You mustn't always believe just what she says. We *none* of us do, you know.' And she blushed, and then they both began to laugh, a thing that always draws young people together even when they don't know what they are laughing at.

'I must go after her,' said Nannie, presently.

'Wait a bit,' answered Sir Vincent. 'I have

heard from my friend about Alick's sketches; don't you want to learn what he says, Nannie?' The name slipped out quite naturally this time, and Nannie seeming as little astonished as if she were a new housemaid, he resolved to stick to it. Vincent sat down on the low wall edging the precipice below Dr. Verrill's house and took out Lord Cookham's letter. 'You can read it yourself,' he said, and held it so that to see it in the bright moonlight, she had to bend towards him a little. The reading took some time, for the style both of writing and expression was unfamiliar to the simple girl, but Vincent saw no occasion to hurry her. How could any one with red hair possibly be so pretty as Nannie? How pure was the outline of her rounded cheek and delicate lips! And what a pretty sparkle came to her soft eyes as she realised the writer's drift, whispering to herself the strange words and complicated sentences, and pointing with one slender, though brown finger to the lines. A more innocent maid than this little Nannie, as she stood beside the gentleman on the edge of the precipice, full of enthusiasms for her dear Alick, could not be imagined. She would not indeed have leaned over a rude fisherman, or even over the postman, in that way; but the remotest fear of Sir Vincent Leicester had never crossed her mind. Gentlemen were not rough and familiar, nor inclined to make coarse

jokes on the smallest provocation. And, moreover, she was so taken up about dear, *appreciated* Alick! The moment was delicious, and neither the man nor the maid cared to shorten it; in fact Nannie entirely forgot to pursue her aunt Mrs. Leach, who had two unexpected half-crowns in her pocket.

But at the back of Dr. Verrill's house were two gaunt, unshuttered windows, which looked straight down on the lonely path and the low protecting wall, bright enough in the moonbeams. And in the house were assembled several persons in a sort of club meeting: the postman, the schoolmaster, and some of the Tanswick shopkeepers, a coastguardsman, one or two young farmers, and others of similar calibre. The only lady was Miss Verrill, who had been out ratting, and was now washing a dog in a corner of the assembly room, and not attending much to the proceedings which she graced with her presence. Dr. Verrill in his shirt-sleeves sat at a table in the middle of the room with his MS. work on vegetables and Alick Randle's plates open before him; a microscope; and sundry botanical specimens all in various stages of decay, including a heap of seaweed, still oozy with brine and full of minute shellfish. The men in the room had their pipes, and were all supplied with steaming glasses of grog; the smell from the oil lamp, the specimens, the

spirits, the dogs, and the hot soap was enough to knock one down.

This meeting was a weekly one, assembled by Dr. Verrill, who was by way of lecturing on his hobby after a vegetarian supper, not always unpalatable to men tired of a fish diet, and glad of the warm room and respectable company, safe from the intrusion of 'fishing loons' and noisy brawls. Dr. Verrill made no stipulations against conversation; so long as he was allowed to lecture he did not care if nobody listened; and indeed those who did listen were not unamused, for the good little man never stuck close enough to his subject to be tedious. 'Our friend Alick,' said the doctor, nodding at the young man, who was wandering round the room, looking bored, 'tells me that in the Heavenly City is a tree whose leaves are for the healing of the nations. Now observe the word *leaves*. We are inclined to eat fruits, roots, stalks, such like, but except in the case of lettuce, we do not by instinct incline to *leaves*. Now, Alick, my lad, you have studied these words. Do you consider from that passage that leaves are on the whole intended to be medicine?

'When I read that verse last, sir,' said Alick modestly, 'my thoughts were lifted up a bit higher than earthly medicines,—commonly ill-

tasting, and not, I should hope, likely to get into the New Jerusalem.'

'Exactly,' cried the doctor; 'healing in that context obviously means food. The leaves of that tree are for the *food* of the nations. This evening I propose to talk to you about leaves. Here are some gathered from that great treasure-house, the sea: are you aware that its bed is a forest of waving leaves, of which nine-tenths are not only edible, but *delicious;* as those which my sister cooked for you this evening? Andrew Martin, last week we discussed and I think established the point, that you as an agriculturist though an unsuccessful one, are engaged in a holier pursuit in the eyes of Dame Nature than your brother the fish auctioneer. Mind, I don't say a word against the consumption of corn. But its cultivation is a well-established industry suited to a new country.'

'Brother,' interrupted Miss Verrill, severely 'your topic is *Leaves.*'

Meanwhile James Ogle was discussing the new landlord and the hewing of timber with the postman. 'I reckon Leicester 'ud cut them oäks quick enough gin they spoiled *his* cabbage. But seeing it's only mine it don't matter,' said the grumbler.

''Taint him,' rejoined the other; 'hey seems a good-tempered chap. It's Blake. It's them stewards and managers ate the grass off the ground and the

flesh off men's bones. It's them makes the landlords the grasping, do-nothing dolts they bey. It's a heavy sin in Blake, ain't it, Alick ? let alone to grind up the poor, but to fester the rich. It's like to breed curses in the long run ; but them sort of curses is contrairy things, and liker to light on my head, or yourn, or maybey Sir Vincent's hisself, than on Blake's.'

Alick did not take up the challenge thrown to him. He was bothered by a remark Miss Verrill had made as she carried away the soap-suds and two of the dogs.

'There's a bright moon over the sea. I looked out of the stair window, and I saw your mother, Alick, and Sir Vincent talking to her. He gave her some money I think, or my eyes have got cataract.'

'What should mother take money of Sir Vincent for ?' thought Alick, resenting Miss Verrill's interference and too proud at once to pursue the mother to seek whom he had come out. And he wanted an interview with Sir Vincent himself. But Alick, the unpledged Nazarite, had tasted Miss Verrill's punch to-night, and was conscious that his temper was not under command. He would not seek Sir Vincent till the morning.

Still he turned his back on the assembly and looked also from the staircase window. He pulled

aside the curtain and gazed out on the night. The moon made a pleasant reflection across the sea; the starry sky was cloudless and blue. There was frost in the air, and with it the tingling silentness which makes the senses keen and strengthens the pulse of life. But of near objects, it was easy to see only those directly in the moonbeams. Alick could not discern his portly mother nor the tall, firm-striding young gentleman. There was no one about, he thought. Only presently he discovered to the right, scarcely visible, a couple of figures down below by the parapet wall: a man sitting on it, half-hidden by the woman to whom he was showing something. Alick watched them, vaguely hearing from the room he had left snatches of talk, which had suddenly blazed up from cabbages and seaweed into violence, assertion of rights, freedom and force, blows and revenge. He was not listening, though he heard; he was thinking of the pair below; lovers he supposed—doubtless unlawful ones. Everwell lovers were generally unlawful.

Surely they must be kissing each other down there in their fancied loneliness, while he was glaring at them with eyes full of senseless jealousy. Ah! they moved a little. The light fell on them better now. If they turned ever so little more he would be able to see their faces, perhaps distinctly enough for recognition, should he meet

them to-morrow on the shore or in the village street——

'You will like to tell Alick yourself, won't you, Nannie?' said Vincent a few moments later; 'here, take the letter, and the pictures, and your story-book, you wise little student. Can you carry all that, or shall I walk round with you?'

'Oh, I can carry it, I *think*,' said Nannie, wishing he would come; 'and thank you so much, sir, for the book and for all——'

'But, Nannie, I have discovered something. This is a portrait of you. Am I not right?' asked Vincent, drawing his finger over the pencil lines. She blushed.

'Yes, sir. You see I am so handy for Alick! Sally and Liz don't care about sitting quiet so long.'

'I expect they wouldn't make such good pictures. But Alick has caricatured you. I see now why you didn't tell me it was your portrait. It was vanity, wasn't it?'

Just what he might have said to a London young lady in a drawing-room with her brother listening. But somehow, when Vincent perceived Alick standing beside them, his first instinctive feeling was a hope that the brother had not overheard. He rose. 'Oh, here is the man himself,' he said, as easily as he could. 'Good evening, Alick. I have been giving your sister a message for you.'—

For the pair *had* turned a little, and the moon had shone on their happy faces, and Alick had recognised them. The effect was instantaneous. It seemed to him a mere blinding, sense-bereaving horror and hatred, but it brought him like an arrow from a string down the stair, across the path to their side. He snatched the picture from Vincent's hand, glanced at it, tore it in pieces, and stamped on it. Then pushing the girl aside with an oath, he thrust himself between the pair, who in sheer amazement had drawn closer together, Vincent with a sudden recollection of Mrs. Leach's suggestions about her poor son's poor head, and the recoil of disgust which all sane people feel at a madman. It will be imagined that the young man who had made short work of the drunken boatman was quick to use his strength in innocent Nannie's behalf!

CHAPTER XI

THEY came to no explanation, for Alick had put himself so entirely in the wrong that no opportunity of speech was allowed him. Vincent sent Nannie home in charge of the postman and Andrew Martin; and then strode off, so angry that a cynic might have suspected him of being a little conscience-

stricken. 'The fool was drunk of course,' he said; 'just the way with your canting hypocrites. Well, for Nannie's sake if for no one else's, he must be got out of Everwell. How the child must hate him!'

All the next day Vincent rode the high horse, astonishing Blake, his present schoolmaster, by his progress, his strong views, and general air of virtue. He mended the quarrel with John, and sent him away on a week's holiday; visited Septimius, and agreed that Sark was more suitable to him than Everwell; went about inspecting the unlet farms and inquiring into the cause of their decline.

'I shall farm that land myself,' said Vincent, pointing to the pretty tree-shaded farmhouse at the end of the dale which ran back from the post-office, and to its desolate fields beyond.

'You, Sir Vincent?' Blake was not so contemptuous of the new baronet as he had been for the first few weeks, but he could not altogether 'stomach him,' as he phrased it.

'I mean I shall find the capital. I intend to study farming; and among the needy enthusiasts you talk of I shall look out a servant, not a tenant.'

'There's that man Randle down by Faverton,' suggested Blake presently, 'he might undertake it if you made it worth his while. Father or son either would do; but the son has married himself there into one of the downright good yeoman families, and

has too many irons in the fire for his wife to let him away in a hurry. He's perhaps a bit too theoretical too. Now the father sits looser to Faverton, and is getting old for so many acres as he has there.'

'He is probably the man I want,' said Vincent. 'We might write and sound him about it. I remember to have heard my father speak of him as sensible and hard-working.'

It did not occur to the young man that Mr. Randle, the Faverton farmer, had anything to do with Nannie, but his thoughts were running more than ever upon the girl; and he intended to go and see her the very first thing in the morning. Was this odious day never coming to an end? What did he care about farms and farmers? The first thing to-morrow morning he would see lovely Nannie again!

But to-night, when it was getting late, Lucy, a raw Faverton girl, sent accidentally in John's absence to open the hall door, came with an announcement. 'If you please, sir, there's a young woman on the door-step who wants to speak to you; and I think she's a beggar,' continued Lucy, 'for she has very red hair and she begun to cry, and I couldn't make out what name she said.'

Vincent had divined instantaneously who it was, and was gone, without awaiting these explanations and surmises.

Yes, it was Nannie, standing outside the very forbidding-looking ancient hall-door, and by the time Vincent had got to her, and had, touching her slender wrist to do so, led her into the great hall with its panelling, its coloured windows, oak chests, suits of armour, and open fireplace, she had swallowed her tears and was resolved to be brave and womanly.

'Oh, please, sir,' cried Nannie, clasping her hands, 'forgive me for disturbing you, but Alick is so dreadfully bad! He has been queer all day, and doesn't hear half we say to him. And he keeps asking for you, sir; and I got so puzzled—I thought maybe you'd come and see him, and say what I ought to do.'

'To be sure I will, Nannie,' said Vincent, all his resentment against Alick vanishing at sight of her distress; 'but I'm a poor doctor. You had better consult Lady Katharine.' Nannie shook her head.

'Sir, it isn't doctoring he wants of you. Please, I'd sooner you came alone.'

She was thinking unutterable things about her poor Alick and Sir Vincent, but not one of them could she say; could, indeed, only look up at the gentleman piteously, with tear-filled eyes. And Vincent looked at her in return,—a long silent look, very much longer than either of them knew.

'I will go with you, Nannie,' said Vincent

at last; and a pink spot burned on her cheek. The idea of the long lonely walk with him gave Nannie an agitated feeling that did not seem exactly shyness, and which was so new she could not be sure if it were pleasure or discomfort.

But as they hurried through the moonless night they scarcely spoke. The girl knew the path best, and her steady little feet never slipped nor faltered. Only once, when a wave louder than usual struck the rock below with a thunder roar, and at the same moment the black form of some wild animal started from her feet with a scream, Nannie sprang back with a shudder and a little cry, and Vincent laid his hand reassuringly on her shoulder. 'Don't be frightened,' he said, softly, and as they moved on the hand was not taken away. Nannie liked it a great deal too much to object. As they neared their destination Nannie suddenly stopped and looked at him, flushing nervously.

'Please, sir—you were just going to be so good to Alick—will you ever be able to forget what he —what Alick did yesterday?' she faltered.

'I should like to understand that matter a little before forgetting it,' he said. Nannie walked on and he followed, wishing he had let Alick and his pictures alone.

'Neither do I understand it,' said the girl piteously; 'Alick was angry with me too, but I

don't know why. And he is very miserable; and I have forgiven him.'

'I can't forgive him for vexing *you*,' said Vincent, 'but if *you* wish it, I will think no more of his insolence *to me*.' Had Nannie been in the least responsive he might have persevered in that soft suggestive tone. As it was, the rest of the journey was made in silence.

'Sir,' said Alick, after a long, drowsy pause, in which Vincent had waited uncomfortably and impatiently, vexed with Nannie who had left him, not interested in Alick, and having come merely to please the girl and to be with her; thinking of her incessantly, fingering a book she had been reading with her name in it, and half-proposing to write her a little note and leave it within the pages for her finding in some silent hour of her night-watch with the sufferer:—'Sir, I have been trying all the evening to think what it was I was wanting to say to you, but it was gone from me like Nebuchadnezzar's dream. I know now, and you must listen.'

'Say on,' said Vincent, wishing him at Jericho, and thrusting Nannie's little blue-covered, old-fashioned volume into his breast-pocket. Alick saw the action.

'Come here, sir. We'll have no talk of my leaving Everwell, Sir Vincent; *you'll not find it so easy to get me away from my girl*.'

'Your sister?' said the visitor, easily, but feeling himself flushing; what right had this man to discern that unheeded suggestion of his worst self?

'She ain't my sister!' shouted Alick, with sudden vehemence, all his various emotions bursting forth at the sound of the cool, careless tone; 'maybe if she had been my sister I'd have minded, but it wouldn't have crazed me like it did. Nannie ain't my sister. She's my sweetheart.'

Vincent had a sensation as if the walls of the little room were crushing in upon him and suffocating him. But he answered coldly, almost disdainfully, 'Indeed? I was not aware. You are to be congratulated. Suppose you took your sweetheart with you?' This coolness was disconcerting to Alick, who wanted to quarrel.

'I will never accept no favours from a man I am not friends with!' he cried, 'and who thinks, I suppose, with his favours to buy——'

'Come now, Alick, this is absurd. You were excited yesterday and under some misapprehension. I am not going to stand in your light because of rubbish like that.'

'Ay, it was all my fault, you think? and you are kind enough to forgive me? How often have you seen my Nannie, sir?'

'Oh, is that what you are at? I don't know, and I don't care if I never see her again. Your

question is ridiculous.' And Vincent resolved to call some one and leave the house. His ears were tingling, for he was not in the habit of lying. The other looked hard at him, reading him through with a much keener perception than Vincent had for himself; and Alick discerned the lie; discerned also that the gentleman had disliked being driven to it.

'Look here, sir,' he said, more temperately, 'will you pledge me your word, on your honour, which I'm thinking is as good as an oath to you, that there shan't never be no love-making between you and Nannie?'

'No, I will not,' said the gentleman; 'I never make pledges about my conduct. Nor will I permit one single word further on this subject.'

Alick was baffled. He had no theoretical objections to being even insolent; but there was that in Vincent's tone which silenced him now. Nor had he yet recovered his power of utterance when the other, after waiting further observations for a reasonable time, left him altogether; passing Nannie in the doorway, who had returned for her night watch. Frightened by the atmosphere of storm, Nannie followed Sir Vincent's retreat with sweet, imploring eyes, the beauty of which he felt now for the first time thoroughly to realise. But he went out, giving her neither word nor farewell look; and Alick lay back gasping, exhausted, and

defeated, after flinging one loud curse at the retiring victor.

'Oh, dear lad, what is the matter?' said the girl's delicious voice, still in Vincent's hearing. But he had escaped, hurrying away into the solitude of the night; the sweet tones still ringing in his ears, the beauty of the sweet eyes still haunting his soul.

Vincent lingered long on the darkened and silent moor, which he had so lately traversed with his hand resting lovingly upon Nannie's warm young shoulder. Now he was alone; and he sat down and let his brow sink dejectedly on his hand. He knew exactly where he was now; carelessness and self-deception were no longer possible. He was an abject fool. He had fallen in love with this child, Nannie Randle;—with Nannie Randle, who, by all the unwritten laws of justice and honour, was out of his reach. Even Alick's blundering interference could not blind him to this fact.

It was a test that was proposed to him. So far Vincent had drifted through his life on the whole in a straight course, but following the impulse and desire of the moment. Now he was suddenly summoned to make a stand, and by his action in this matter, to declare not for others only, but for himself, what manner of man he intended to be.

There was one person of whom at this moment

he had not the very faintest recollection; the woman he intended to marry—Georgina Bryant.

CHAPTER XII

A FEW days afterwards Lady Katharine sought her son, who was sitting gloomily biting his nails, the instructive books open before him and his attention fixed elsewhere.

'Vincent, dear, may I give you my opinion? I am most unwilling to say such a thing, but I have been visiting some of the cottages a good deal this week, and I cannot help thinking Mr. Leicester *has* neglected the parish a little. And, dear, if he *wishes* to make a change, it is perhaps a pity to persuade him to reconsider his decision.'

'Well? I know all that,' said the son, crossly, and then begged his mother's pardon; who had looked surprised at his tone, but at once, on his apology, smiled forgiveness.

'And your cousin Augustine will, I am sure, be delighted to give up his curacy.'

'Oh, confound it! I am not thinking of *him*.' Lady Katharine looked greatly surprised again. Sir Charles had never spoken to her so.

'I beg your pardon, mother,' repeated Vincent.

'Yes, it is all settled about Septimius. He means to study beetles in Sark. As to Augustine—do you know that chap, mother?'

'Not at all now,' said Lady Katharine comfortably.

'Is he—efficient?'

'Efficient?' Into Lady Katharine's benevolent head the idea of a young clergyman being inefficient had never entered. 'I haven't met him since he was a lad. You remember the Easter holidays he spent with you, Vincent, and what a nice——'

'I remember thinking him a prig.'

'I suppose, Vincent, you will respect your dear father's intentions?'

Vincent frowned and was silent for some moments. 'I cannot think,' he said, slowly, 'that my father would have given an important charge to a man he knew nothing about. Anyway—I won't.'

'Shall we invite him now?' asked the widow, surprised again.

'No, I couldn't judge of a man to order. But I know nothing suitable about him. He is scarcely older than I am myself, and he has bad health and a priggish disposition. Why should I pitch upon him?'

'Because he's your cousin, Vincent!' cried Lady Katharine, astonished at his ignorance of simple arrangements.

'But I don't like that sort of nepotism. I mean

to have a man who to my knowledge understands his business. That is of more importance than his relationship to me.'

'But, indeed, Vincent, you are hasty. You should not decide against Augustine in this way. Have you perhaps some friend you want to bring here?'

'Favouritism, you think, *versus* nepotism? Well, I don't know much about parsons, nor do I hold with them altogether myself. Still, I am fortunate in an acquaintance with one. *I have already offered the living to Mr. Bryant.*'

Lady Katharine had one merit, she always gave in when she saw that her mankind was resolved. And her son's friendship with the 'nice clergyman' had always pleased her. So she only repeated—

'I think, dear, you have been hasty about Augustine; still, I am sure from your description Mr. Bryant would be admirably adapted to the needs of the place, and I hope, if you decide upon it, you will be able to induce him to come.'

'That's settled then,' said Vincent, who still looked gloomy. Presently he said, 'I have already heard of a probable tenant and possible purchaser for Faverton; I think I must go there at once and invite him to stay for a day or two and look about

the place well. Will you come with me? And whether I come to terms with him or not—he doesn't want possession immediately—I propose that you and I should remain there for the rest of the winter.' Lady Katharine was quite bewildered now, especially by her son's expression of profound wretchedness.

'But not on my account, dear? I thought you were so anxious to stay here for the present.'

'I have changed my mind.' She was still looking at him in dismay; certainly he *was* very hasty. 'Perhaps, Vincent,' ventured the widow cautiously, 'you will change your mind about selling Faverton.'

'No. But I have a reason, a perfectly good one, though I don't care to explain it, for not wishing to be here for the next three or four months. Faverton is still on our hands; let us go there. Or if you would rather go abroad, say so. I will take you to Rome if you wish it,' said Vincent, in a low voice.

Lady Katharine at once understood everything. She had gathered from her son that the lady, the eminently suitable lady whom he loved, was in Rome this winter. His gloom, his irritation, his change of purpose was obviously connected with her. Poor dear boy! And she had been feeling surprised

and even displeased at him, when perhaps he was suffering acutely.

'Dearest Vincent,' she said, putting her arm round his neck tenderly, 'I will do whatever you like. Perhaps, dear,' she said, sympathetically, 'by yourself, you would be better able——'

Vincent laughed. 'We are at cross purposes, mother. Come, if you will do exactly what I like, then we will go together to Faverton, and stay there for the present. I may wish to go to Rome later, but I am not in a hurry.'

Evidently something was wrong with Sir Vincent. He stood long at the library window when he was left alone this morning, looking out wistfully as if half expecting to see Nannie's graceful figure coming over the cliff again with a message for him. But there was no sign of her, and at last he turned away with an impatient sigh. He took down some books from his shelves which he fancied she would like, and wrote her name in them; then made them and her little blue volume (carried away in his pocket) into a parcel, with a slip of paper inside it on which he wrote, 'For your sweetheart, with my compliments. I hope I shall find her your wife upon my return in the spring.'

The parcel was sent by Dr. Verrill, who reported to Sir Vincent on Alick's condition. 'The fellow gets a brain fever now and then,' said the experi-

mentalist, contentedly; 'it does him good. It's like the woman's anguish remembered no more when she has her man-child. His temper was diabolical till he sickened the first time; after his second attack he became a Christian and a vegetarian. But what's the matter with yourself, young sir? You look as if a brain fever or something would be a relief to your system.' Vincent laughed, and trusted the little doctor with his parcel.

'But you will be sure,' he said, 'to put it into the hands of the man himself when he has recovered. Don't give it to the girl, or to any one else.'

As Sir Vincent and his mother drove to Tanswick Station on their way to Faverton a day or two later, they passed Nannie Randle standing in the road watching for the carriage. Vincent resolutely looked at the horses' ears, and Nannie got not so much as a glance—still less the smile she had been expecting. So disappointed was she that tears filled her eyes as she stood there alone on the moor. Alick had tossed her the books crossly enough, but had said not one word about Sir Vincent; he had recovered from his illness and partly from his suspicions. At any rate Nannie was innocent, and if Sir Vincent was going away, well—perhaps it was all right. He would say nothing to frighten her now at any rate. Nannie carried her books aside, and for a long time sat

gazing at her name in his beautiful writing. There was no way she could thank him; Alick had refused to let her send a message or to take it herself. But she watched for the carriage: smiles at least were free, and Sir Vincent would understand. Why, oh why, would he not look round?

PART III

ILL WEEDS GROW APACE

CHAPTER I

Mr. Bryant was vicar of the London parish where his second marriage had found him curate. That much promotion had come to him early. He was a man of some standing and popularity, who wrote for religious magazines and was always in request to occupy vacant pulpits. His church was well filled, and his parish, an uninteresting one, was always mentioned as well and successfully worked. Mr. Bryant was on the whole well satisfied with his position, and devoted to good works. For the son of a small country grocer, he had got on very well; indeed by this time the grocery connection was entirely forgotten: the clergyman had acquired the manners of society, and it never occurred to any one to ask who he was, or where he had come from. As to Mrs. Bryant, well, she was a very quiet woman; stay-at-home, because her thoughts were much in the past, and she was ill at ease in what she called 'company.' She was childless, and consequently apt to be sorrowful; and she

had lost her beauty of face and figure; in fact, she had not kept pace with her husband; but he never confessed even to himself that he was disappointed, and indeed long habit had in great measure blinded him to the fact. Mr. Bryant worked hard in his parish and outside it, while Emma sat at home with her needlework and housekeeping; whenever she liked she drove in the parks, or went for long, interesting, shopping excursions to Shoolbred's. Years had passed in this manner, and then one or two little circumstances waked Mr. Bryant up, as it were; and set him asking himself, not only if he had 'got on' as far as he had originally intended, but as far as was possible for the man he was. That instinct for 'getting on' is very valuable, whether to nation or to individual; but the man who wants to 'get on' should beware of chaining himself to a lagging companion. One of two results must inevitably follow from that blunder; either he will be brought to a premature standstill, possibly ill-humoured; or the laggard will be forced beyond his speed: and he who goes beyond his speed goes to destruction.

The first little circumstance was that the Bishop of X—— made Mr. Bryant's acquaintance through his brother, an admiring college friend of the London vicar's. The Bishop took a violent fancy to Mr. Bryant, and very nearly offered him an excellent

country living in his gift, close to the pleasant cathedral town, where was the Palace and much valuable sacerdotal society. The idea of that living made Mr. Bryant's teeth water; he had not known till the suggestion was made how tired he was of London and his daily laborious and ill-paid routine. The Bishop spent a day with him, took luncheon at the vicarage, and conversed friendlily, if somewhat shyly or stiffly, with Emma. In imagination Mr. Bryant took up residence in the country parsonage by the cathedral town. But the Bishop left London, and Mr. Bryant never heard more of the fat living, nor did he ever understand what had been the slip between the cup and the lip. Only it happened that his lordship, a careless man, and writing on the same day to his brother and to Mr. Bryant, put the letters into the wrong envelopes, and Mr. Bryant, who of course read no farther than 'My dear brother,' did accidentally catch sight of the words, 'wife would not be adapted to the society of——' He had no reason in the world to suppose that the remark had any connection with himself. Still it struck him and remained in his mind, playing the part of some accidental sound or flash of light which wakes the sleeper just before the housemaid brings the hot water and opens the shutters. And the second little circumstance was Sir Vincent Leicester's description of the absent

Georgina and desire to marry her. A boyish, an absurd, a preposterous idea; but again Mr. Bryant couldn't forget it; and after thinking it over and learning a little more about his daughter, and hearing from herself and others that Vincent was not her only distinguished suitor, he sighed a little, and hoped he not been over hasty and over scrupulous in quenching his favourite pupil's pretensions.

And just after he had arrived at this point came young Sir Vincent's very nice, modest, and affectionate letter, offering him the vacant living of Everwell. It was not exactly promotion, as that fat living near X—— would have been; still it is evident that the offer was tempting, and for more reasons than one. Only Emma hesitated and threw cold water. 'You are so sanguine, Edward,' she said, with a sigh; 'and the young man will be always talking to us of Faverton.'

'Nonsense, my love, nonsense,' said Mr. Bryant, and made up his mind. No sooner was his appointment to the vacant benefice announced than welcoming letters from acquaintances in the new diocese poured in upon him. He was surprised to find he had already a reputation there, and felt that he was going to make a mark in his new parish, out of the world though it seemed.

'You are always so sanguine, Edward,' repeated Mrs. Bryant; 'I am sure I hope you won't repent it.'

The very day before they left London for the

north a letter arrived which perplexed Mr. Bryant not a little. It was from Georgina.

'I hope, dearest papa, it will be convenient to you to receive me immediately. Auntie has emphatic reasons for wishing my temporary departure, and I am anxious for a long holiday. I will give you further explanations when we meet.'

'Most extraordinary,' commented Mr. Bryant; 'and inconvenient.'

'Any other papa would be glad his daughter was coming home,' said Emma; 'she'll be company for me, and I never could bear her being away so much with that foreign woman. It would serve us right if she turned Papist, or outlandish, or something.'

'Nonsense, my love,' said Mr. Bryant as usual; but he was disquieted, and set off for his new parish nervously. What would Sir Vincent think? And what might not his lady mother think? Georgina's advent was premature.

CHAPTER II

If I were writing the history of Georgina Bryant, I should have to enter into many particulars of that winter of hers in Rome, for it had considerable

influence on her character. As it is, I need but briefly explain the quarrel between her and her so-called aunt.

'I hope, Georgina,' that lady had said, 'before the winter is over to have the satisfaction of arranging a suitable marriage for you.'

'Dear auntie,' said the girl, 'have we become so un-English? sha'n't I arrange my own marriage?'

This was the season when Georgina was writing playful, familiar, affectionate letters to her dear cousin Vincent, whom she believed herself in love with, and whom she meant to retain as a lover. But she had abandoned all idea of marrying him. A rich, adoring, learned, noble, elderly husband, and crowds of admirers, of whom Vincent Leicester was chief,—that was Georgina's ideal at present. She wrote familiarly to Vincent, and she flirted with this man and that; but she was all the while trying on Lord Cookham's coronet, deciding that it fitted, and wondering why he did not come to the point. Georgina certainly became presuming at this time, and the Baroness was displeased. However, the nobleman spoke at last.

One day the Baroness called Georgina to her, and said she wished to thank the dear girl for the solicitous kindness she had ever shown to one whose life had been early shattered by the cruellest blow a woman's fate has at command. Georgina returned

to her French novel till her aunt had exhausted this strain. She descanted further upon the desolation of a young and childless widow.

Georgina, without looking up, remarked that a moneyless spinster was in a worse position, and an old bride was a more disagreeable spectacle. The lady's eye flashed, but she put her handkerchief to her eyes and lamented for her deceased Austrian husband. Georgina thought more of this would drive her distracted.

'Why did you never tell me, dearest auntie,' she cried, 'that he was so beloved?' The Baroness dropped the sentimental air, which indeed became her but indifferently, and said—

'I have to speak to you, my dear, of marriage, but I see it will suit you best to describe it as a purely business transaction. Lord Cookham has spoken to me, Georgina.' The girl's eyes sparkled, and she kissed the lady effusively. 'I have accepted his offer,' said the Baroness.

'What, without consulting me?' said the delighted Georgina.

'Your affectation of importance is absurd, my dear. No, I have not consulted a child like you.'

'Oh, well, auntie dear, I have my own opinion, you know. Have you considered the difference of age, for instance? It is highly disagreeable for the younger married person to be in constant attendance

on one getting infirm and sickly and decrepit,—perhaps paralyzed, like old Colonel Endelby.'

The Baroness rose in great dudgeon and said the girl was impertinent. 'I have known Lord Cookham for so long,' she went on; 'the state of his affections has been the same for so many years, his heart and mind and soul have been so laid bare——'

'Yes,' said Georgina, 'but all this should have been laid bare to *me*, if I am to marry him.'

The Baroness turned and looked hard at her adopted daughter, half pityingly, half scornfully, wholly triumphantly.

'*You*, Georgina?' she said, with a laugh; '*you*, my dear child?'

The girl understood now as by a lightning flash, and covered her discomfiture by a hearty fit of laughter, whether at herself or her aunt, who could tell?

From henceforth it was war. Georgina could not forget that she had been made a fool of. Nor could the Baroness forget that her dependent had been her rival. Lord Cookham, for years an avowed admirer of the widow,—she was only five years his senior,—had come to Rome with the express intention of seeking her hand. It was, however, true that his admiring eyes had strayed away to Georgina, and that this fact had very much

delayed the proposal extorted from him at last by the dowager. Georgina soon understood it all, and took measures accordingly. Though it had become a matter of theft, she was more firmly resolved than ever to marry Lord Cookham; she was now not merely covetous, she was burning for revenge.

There ensued a secret and very reprehensible flirtation between the two, while the gentleman was nominally betrothed to the widow. Georgina gained a confession that he had proposed from a sense of duty, and would escape from his engagement to-morrow if it could be accomplished unscandalously. Yet he sighed, for his widow was rich and important, well-informed and worthy; while Georgina was just a handsome but ignorant and probably troublesome nobody—not at all the sort of wife to suit him in reality. Georgina sighed too, and gave him to understand she was dying of love. And then one day there was some kissing, which had nothing to do with the proposed relation of uncle and niece, and the Baroness saw it; and the moment of the crisis had come.

Many a woman would have thrown the perfidious lover over at once. The Baroness was not going to give in to the audacious Georgina in that manner. She sent for Lord Cookham and gave him her opinion of his conduct and of the girl's, threatening to make the whole thing public. She explained who

Georgina was: just a distant relative whom she had adopted out of charity; her father the son of a small tradesman, probably a pawnbroker; her step-mother of low origin and without a character; the two of them vulgar, pushing people. Georgina had a showy manner, but by nature was pushing and vulgar too. Lord Cookham did not believe all this, but he believed enough to feel that the pursuit of Georgina was a game not worth its candle. He was very angry; but, being the man he was, he began to desire escape from the toils of the designing young creature who had set herself to achieve his ruin. He and the Baroness made it up—to outward appearance at least; and Georgina was defeated. She tried various attitudes: she was repentant; she was heart-broken; she was love-sick; she was sarcastic; she was impertinent; and she was always formidable. The Baroness was not to be taken in by her a second time. She must be crushed. Georgina was dismissed; and with a long statement of accounts which proved that her constant habit of overdrawing her allowance had left her largely in debt to her benefactress. She spent a fortnight with some friends, who tried unsuccessfully to mediate between her and her relative, and upon failure, turned against the girl. She wrote to Lord Cookham, now safe in Austria; he sent no answer for a month, and then declined

to see her again, apologised lamely, and said that the wedding was fixed for the morrow.

Georgina was under her father's roof by the time she received that letter, for none of her enemies had relented, and she had no other home to go to. She had played for too high stakes, and had lost.

'No matter,' she said, 'that sort of game requires practice. I was a beginner. And all is not lost. I have gained experience; and I will marry my dear boy Vincent. After all, I detested Cookham, and I daresay it is more comfortable when one's kisses come from a man one likes. But I shall make a point of cultivating Lord Cookham when I am Lady Leicester. The old woman shall again suffer the stings of jealousy.'

CHAPTER III

To receive the new parson, Sir Vincent Leicester returned to Everwell in the early days of sunny June. He was in high good humour, for he was full of energy, had let his place at Faverton advantageously, and was, he believed, able to laugh at his folly about Nannie Randle. Even Alick he greeted with friendliness, for the man had made a voluntary

apology, and Sir Vincent, aware that the rupture had been partly his own fault, convinced too that Alick had been temporarily crazy, had decided against any manifestations of resentment. And, indeed, upon his return, he found Alick risen to a position so dignified that it was necessary to treat him with respect.

Mr. Bryant, the new parson, was admitted by all to be the coming Messiah; but who ever heard of a Messiah without a forerunner—a John the Baptist? Alick Randle had accepted the situation. For with the hot weather typhus had broken out in the fishing village, and great consequent alarm, which Alick, seeing his opportunity, partly allayed and partly fomented by the introduction of a sudden and spreading fervency of religion. His last salutary attack of brain fever had left him increased in wisdom and moral stature, and in favour with God and man. This was Dr. Verrill's account. Alick himself only said modestly that the call to preach had come, and it was not for him to resist. 'Things took their way gradually, you see, my lady,' he explained. 'When Sir Vincent wrote to me that I was to get this little shed in the village highway turned into a building for a Sunday schoolhouse, at the request of the new minister, it was borne in on my mind very strongly that it was a temple for the Lord we were called to build, like Moses or Solomon. And I got talking

of it natural like to a many of the men about, and without meaning it, that come into a sort of preachment. And when it came to the adorning of the house, I found there wasn't no one who had had it put into his heart so clear as into mine, like Bezaleel and Aholiab, what was wanted. So I have done it myself, and the folk used to come and look on; and then it came natural to speak to them a bit. But when we have the new minister among us, then I cannot think it will be my place to preach any longer.'

Lady Katharine was pious, and could not at once find a flaw in Alick's title to a hearing. Besides he was impressive in this little temple he had planned and beautified out of slender materials. He was working at an illuminated text as he spoke, watched by a knot of young people, at once respectful and curious, and as the sunshine shone on his earnest face and swift steady hand, Lady Katharine and Sir Vincent watched and wondered and admired also, and listened to what he said. No doubt Alick Randle had some spiritual power of commanding attention, but much of his influencing force was purely physical. He had eyes that made you look at him, and a voice that made you hear. Alick never was five minutes in any company that every one was not looking 'to see what he was going to do.' Everwell had been watching Alick all his

life to see what he was going to do. Was he to be a handy carpenter like Jim Leach, or a celebrated 'hartist' like his grandfather? For long he had been undecided and desultory. But the call had come now, and he had stepped boldly forth. His *rôle* was understood at once: he was to be a Voice crying in the wilderness—a forerunner of the new minister who was coming to save the souls of the people.

Before the new parson's arrival Mrs. Leach had a question to ask. She was telling her son about her first visit to their newly-arrived relatives at the Home Farm. 'It was so long since I'd seen 'em, Alick, my dear,' she said, 'it quite upset me. "Ben," says I, "my heart goes out to you, a widow man still and me a widow woman again." There's nothing like one's own kindred for drawing aside the curtains of the heart and making one reveal secrets —meaning my first husband's kindred, so they be.'

'And did you reveal secrets, mother?' said Alick, indifferently.

'Oh no. I'm a very secret woman,' said Mrs. Leach, who had but a hazy recollection of that agitating conversation; 'still I talked a bit of Nannie, who was a babe when her mother was took, and I been like a second parent to her. Her father never was grateful like he ought; but gratitood, Alick, is not what a single-hearted and double-widowed woman like me should look after in this

life. No one can say I ain't a prudent woman,' continued Mrs. Leach, 'when I didn't even tell the name of the new minister who's a-coming, and they not knowing it, poor ignorant bodies.'

'Why shouldn't you have told his name?' growled Alick.

'Run away, Sal; run away, Liz, my pretty dears. I'm talking confidences with your good brother. Why now, Alick,' and she came nearer and dropped her voice, 'Alick, my lad, the new parson's name is Bryant. Now that's the very name of my brother-in-law who married Emma, and is a parson, and made her a lady.'

Alick had often heard of that parsonical brother-in-law, and was highly sceptical about him. Mr. Bryant and Aunt Emma, so Nannie reported, were never mentioned at the farm, as would have been only natural had they been so creditable to the family. Alick had a recollection of Aunt Emma when he had been a small boy at Faverton, and she a tearful woman pleading for something stern Aunt Sarah refused to give. That recollection gave no exalted impression of Aunt Emma, and Alick had long arrived at the conclusion that Bryant was some kind of swindler.

At this moment Sir Vincent came in, and Mrs. Leach was going to mention the coincidence when Alick hastily interposed, to prevent allusion to the

ambiguous brother-in-law. 'Mother was saying, sir,' said Alick, 'that she once knew a minister named Bryant who belonged to London, and was wondering if it could be the same;' and Vincent replied that Bryant was a common name, and London a large place, and he believed—he was not sure—that his Mr. Bryant came from Essex, or perhaps from Manchester. And Mrs. Leach said she had known her Mr. Bryant at Faverton in the days of her first husband, poor dear Jim Randle.

'Oh, then, it is clearly not the same,' said Vincent. 'Mr. Bryant never heard of Faverton except from me;' and the subject dropped. Vincent could have given no direct authority for that last statement; but he had made it in good faith, the result of many conversations with his tutor in old times, when the name of the pupil's home had come into the talk.

'I told you it wasn't the same, mother,' said Alick, gruffly; but Mrs. Leach was not entirely convinced, though she held her peace, being a prudent and a secret woman.

Then Vincent started for Tanswick, where he was to meet Mr. and Mrs. Bryant. There was no particular cause for elation, but he did feel elated; so did Mr. Bryant himself when he arrived, and so did Alick, his forerunner, who had walked far along the road for a first glimpse of the man of God. How

his face lighted up when he saw the attractive, benevolent, good countenance of the new clergyman, for whom he had prayed and on whom he was staking his hopes. The artist in Alick saw at once that the expression, the voice, the manner were verily those of the ideal pastor. His prayers were heard! God had a favour unto Everwell!' Her day of darkness was ended; the dawn of her righteousness had come.

'Hallo, Alick!' sang out Sir Vincent, 'tell Mrs. Leach I left my pencil-case at her house, and ask her to send up one of the lads with it.' From which remark and a few added explanations the quick-witted Mr. Bryant made a mental note—

'Alick *Leach;* influential, godly; to be treated with friendliness and some caution.'

Alick went to bed that night as pleased as possible; but both Sir Vincent and Mr. Bryant had felt a sobering touch on their spirits. To each it had come from Emma.

Vincent had taken for granted that his friend's wife would be charming. She proved not only tumbled and dusty, but stout and too hot; a little fretful and very shy; obviously, not ideal like Mr. Bryant. The crowd round the parsonage door, which delighted every one else, alarmed her and made her awkward. There was the postman with his mouth wide open: and the baker, and the sexton,

and old John the butler, and all the young Leaches, and a group of fishermen; and young Joe Randle, the newcomer, with a straw in his mouth, and a gorgeous necktie. And there was Miss Verrill in a pot hat and a much abbreviated skirt, sitting smoking on the wall; and the coatless doctor smelling some lichen he had found in the crevices. Miss Verrill jumped down and rushed across the road to seize Mrs. Bryant's hand, crying, 'I am glad, ma'am, to welcome you to Everwell. Female society has been at a discount here.'

Mrs. Bryant was terrified, and turned her back on the apparition. Then she saw the doctor running away with a basket she had cherished for the whole journey, and which contained some ill-packed china, her best cap, the remains of sandwiches, and a pot of begonia. The latter article had attracted the vegetarian, and he was already eating the one young leaf. 'Edward,' said Mrs. Bryant, stung into speech, 'will you require that rude man to let my things alone.' The Verrills both took a dislike to Mrs. Bryant. And now, worst of all, the stately Lady Katharine and her formidable maid appeared at the hall door. They had come an hour ago to see that all was ready, and had themselves prepared a dainty tea in the dining-room, while the charwoman held up her hands, saying, 'Eh now, my lady! Lord bless us! my lady!'

But the charwoman was less confused than poor Emma, who had seen Lady Katharine Kane in her youth, and regarded her as a far-off divinity. When Sir Vincent's mother offered her hand, Mrs. Bryant drew hers awkwardly back; she sat down on the chair her husband had placed for Lady Katharine, and then discovering her mistake, jumped up nervously, and could hardly be induced to sit down at all. She almost let slip 'My lady,' like a country girl again. Mr. Bryant had never observed his wife so awkward before, and was unspeakably mortified.

'Vincent, love,' said Lady Katharine, when later she and her son were walking home together, 'Mr. Bryant is exactly what I expected from your description. I am so delighted to have him here; but tell me, did it strike you that Mrs. Bryant is a little—just a very little—what I should be tempted to call *underbred*, you know?' And then his mother proceeded cautiously, but with certain suspicions in her mind, to give him another shock. 'She tells me,' said Lady Katharine, 'that Miss Bryant, her stepdaughter, is coming here very soon.' After this there was silence; they were both foreseeing complications, and Vincent's elation had all oozed out at his finger ends.

CHAPTER IV

DURING all these months Alick had kept silence to Nannie, while she had lived on in his mother's house, his daily friend and companion. The frivolities of innocent courtship which might have grown up in the early days of his affection had been effectually nipped in the bud by that dark suspicion of Sir Vincent, and by his own sombre religious views, the influence of which spread daily. Nor had love of the mating kind as yet entered into Nannie's thoughts; nay, a hint of it, a suspicion that it could be in Alick's, offended her. But now, in June, this chapter in their lives was closed, for Nannie's father had come to Everwell, and it was not to be expected that the girl would be left with her aunt, nor that her intimacy with Alick could continue without some definite relationship. Alick had made up his mind to speak to her plainly; and he had good hopes, for he knew that Nannie was as fond of him as she could possibly be of any one short of a lover.

This evening she had been with him in the new schoolhouse—his temple, as he called it—watching him complete a little bit of decoration, and helping him to arrange the benches for the new parson's *début*. 'And now we'll walk over to the farm,

Alick, won't we?' said Nannie, tapping his arm. 'I can't think however they'll do here. Why they'll be foreigners! But I now, I'm like Ever-well born and bred, ain't I, Alick?'

He looked at her flushed cheek, and his own grew very pale; yes, that chapter in their lives was ended. Alick pointed to the little chancel he had contrived, for in his ignorance he had made his temple as like the church as he could, and to the dark oak table which stood under the high-up eastern window—an altar surely, and God's unseen angel for officiating priest! 'Nannie, lass, come up there a minute and kneel with me.' Nannie obeyed rather listlessly.

'Will God hear us more here than on the rocks or the hills, Alick?' she asked.

'I suppose so, Nan, or why should we have churches or temples? But, lassie, I pray this prayer to Him everywhere, lest, after all, He might like best the sea strand or the hillside as He made Himself;' and he took her hand and led her to the step of the little chancel, the girl consenting, but half unwilling. He had a fancy that it was the hour of their spiritual marriage. 'I will tell thee all presently,' said Alick; 'but ask Him to grant it first, Nannie! Pray for it earnestly. It is not a common thing, and it is life or death to me.' Nannie sprang to her feet.

'Oh, Alick, come away. I can't pray like that.

God wouldn't like it. It is like—Alick, it is like the Wishing Well!' Alick looked round shuddering, as if her words had been those of some alien spirit. 'Lad,' said Nannie, apologetically, 'say out what it is, and we'll ask Him together. I know it's right to ask God for everything; only not telling me! it made me feel as if we were playing with Him.'

'Ay, maybe I was wrong! Maybe God thought I was playing with Him! If He don't hear me, Nannie, I'll know its punishment.'

'Tell me what it is, Alick, dear,' said Nannie gently. He let his eyes rest on her sweet, fair face, and his voice was almost soundless from emotion when he answered, slowly, after a pause—

'Nannie, I'll say it here at God's footstool. I want thee for my lass, Nannie; for my wife.' Then he rose suddenly and would have embraced her; but Nannie, with a little scream, flung him from her, starting back and standing defiantly at a short distance, her hands clasped and her eyes flashing.

'I will not have you nor no one saying such things to me, Alick!' she said, angrily, and turned away, going to the door and waiting there imperiously for him to come and open it. Alick was alarmed by what he had done; after all his waiting, he had spoken too soon.

In a few minutes, as Alick did not move and she was imprisoned with him, Nannie walked back

with stately step, shook his arm, and then stood before him with an air of quivering scorn. 'I couldn't think of marrying you, Alick,' she said. 'I won't. There!'

Alick simply turned away. Then Nannie returned to the door without looking back till she reached it.

'Are you going to leave me to walk up alone, Alick?'

'Where to?' said he.

'Home—to father.' He roused himself.

'You'll come back afterwards with me, lass?'

'No; I shall stop there after this,' said Nannie, proudly. 'Unlock the door, Alick.'

He followed her out, turning the key as usual, while Nannie stood beside him, holding his paint-brushes; none of the bystanders noticed anything different from yesterday about them. Then they walked away through the falling dusk, Alick hurrying along in front and Nannie following as best she could; both sternly silent, but thinking hard. After a long time Alick noticed her lagging and he heard a little sob. Looking back, he found Nannie in tears, and as he stopped she joined him, and put out a gentle hand and laid it in his.

'Forgive me, dear lad, if I haven't answered you properly,' said little Nannie; 'I'm not at all used to have such things said to me.'

'Nan,' said Alick, abruptly, 'you hadn't meant to leave us for good and all. Forget them foolish words of mine and come back home, lassie.'

'If I thought you didn't mean it, Alick!'

'Mean it, lass? I meant it sure enough. I know very well, Nannie, I'm crooked and ill-favoured, and ill to live with——'

'Alick, how can you?' interrupted Nannie, 'as if all that would matter in any one one loved!'

'Ay, lass, but women aren't like to love a man with those qualities,' said Alick, sadly. Nannie was silent for a moment. His tone moved her.

'Oh, Alick, I couldn't; I couldn't marry anybody! I never thought of marrying before. I thought you were like my brother. I never thought of anything else. It isn't right for cousins to marry, is it?' she said, desperately.

'Ay, it is, Nannie,' said Alick. You don't care for no one else, lassie? Set my mind at ease by saying that.' Nannie's cheek grew hot.

'No, Alick, I never thought of marrying. I'm only seventeen,' she said, hastily and incoherently. 'I have never seen a man it would do for me to want to marry.'

'Nannie!' said Alick, with something of a groan, 'I wish you'd marry me. I cannot think you'll be safe without me to take care of you.'

'Safe from what, dear lad?'

'From wicked persons, Nannie. I wish you wasn't so pretty——'

'Maybe you wouldn't have wanted me then, Alick,' said Nannie, saucy through her tears. 'Men aren't like to love a woman that isn't pretty.'

'Ay, Nannie, that's it,' said Alick. 'I'm afraid some as shouldn't will be thinking you, like I do, the prettiest lass in the world. I'd have loved thee anyhow, dear lass.'

'Alick, I will think over what you say. Maybe I'll love you enough some day. But you mustn't say no more now. I'll be your little sister, like I always was.' Then she put her hand in his. 'Maybe some day, lad; when I'm older.'

They had reached the farmhouse now, and both stopped by a common impulse, looking at each other sadly before entering.

'You'll give me a kiss, Nannie, because I love you so?'

'I have often kissed you afore, Alick. I don't mind kissing you now if you wish it.'

'But I don't want that sort of kiss, Nannie, like you have given me afore.'

'I will not have you kiss me no other now,' said Nannie, with a little relapse into offence. Then she pushed open the door and went in; but her lover turned and hurried away, still left to the agony of hope deferred.

CHAPTER V

THE door opened directly on the large square hall, where Nannie's two sisters, her sister-in-law, and two brothers, were all assembled for the evening meal, round an oak table of great size and antiquity, above which hung an iron lamp, just lighted and flaring uncomfortably. The sister-in-law, a stranger to Nannie, was a very superb young woman in black satin and jewellery, prodigiously admired in her own circle, especially by her husband, a very dapper young man who drove a dogcart, and whom Nannie held in some awe. This couple had only come to Everwell for a few days to see the new place, which fact accounted for the leisurely magnificence of their attire. Miss Randle—Patty—was dressed with extreme plainness; her turn-down white collar and neatly plaited hair suited her square-featured, old-maidish, but not unpleasing countenance. Caroline, three years younger than Patty, was considered delicate, a beauty, and quite the lady. Joe was the best looking, and by far the least conceited of the family. One and all they despised Everwell, and couldn't conceive what had bewitched father to come to this outlandish spot where there was no society, no style, and no convenience.

Into this very superior family enter Nannie, the child of nature. She was seized by a panic, such as she had not suffered from in the presence of even her ladyship; so she stood in the doorway, her hand on the latch, hesitating and trembling.

'La, Patty, whoever's this!' exclaimed Mrs. John, genuinely astonished.

The brothers both thought it playful to banter their youngest sister.

'It's the Scarlet Runner!' said Joe.

'An Everwell fishing lass!' said John; 'go away, my dear; herrings don't suit *our* stomach at this hour. Or if it's begging you are, we don't give to people we don't know.'

'For shame, Nannie, coming out alone at this hour!' said Patty; and Caroline exclaimed—

'Did you ever see such a figure? Why, she doesn't look as respectable as Janet!'

Nannie advanced, trembling. 'I have come home, Patty. Aren't you going to kiss me? Where is father?'

'Father hasn't recovered himself after the visit he had from your Aunt Ann. He wouldn't have come here if he had known the sort of tipsy relations he had. I wonder you didn't tell us, Nannie; but I suppose you like that sort of thing, as you chose a whole year of it. Joe, tell father Nannie has come, dropping in by herself in the dark for all the

world like a repented runaway; and ask him what we are to do.'

Nannie was quite taken aback by this reception, and felt her scarce-wiped tears coming again. 'Indeed, Alick walked with me the whole way,' she faltered.

'I don't know as that makes it any better,' answered Patty, severely; 'it never was my notion of propriety for a young woman to take long walks of an evening alone with her young man, especially when she's not of an age to have a young man at all.'

'I don't know what you mean,' said Nannie.

'Don't you? Perhaps you don't know we've heard all about you and Alick. I must say, Nannie, if it is all right and proper, as I suppose you'll say it is, you ought to have told father yourself, and not have left the news for a stranger to tell, who had the last right in the world to know anything about you and your sweethearts. Why don't you come in, child, if you have done nothing to be ashamed of, instead of standing there in the door like a beggar?'

At this moment Mr. Randle appeared, a well-fed, vigorous man, with an expression of much resolution and some ill-temper.

'Father,' cried Nannie, springing forward and seizing his hand, 'aren't you glad to see me? What does Patty mean? Mayn't I come home and be your daughter again?'

'My daughter indeed!' said Mr. Randle, holding her at arm's length, 'what have you got an inkling too? I suppose she inkles it all round when she's in liquor. We'll wash our dirty linen at home, Nan. You may come home, my girl, and the more you stay at home the better. I've heard a thing or two of you as don't seem creditable to my daughter as you call yourself. But look ye, Nannie; there's only one way out of these doubts and disgraces. I never was partial to disgraces nor apt to be tender to them as brought them into my family. You are my daughter, you know, and I'll give you a portion like the tothers, but the sooner you marry your hunchback and take yourself off my hands the better pleased I'll be.'

All this time the farmer had been holding the girl by the two hands at arm's length; now he pushed her back and threw her from him with some violence. 'Patty,' he said, 'set a place for Nannie, and come to supper all of you.'

Nannie stood white and trembling, but erect, facing her brothers and sisters, who were all staring at her, and as much astonished by their father's expressions as she was herself. The dapper Mr. John alone seemed a little sorry; he put a chair for her and chucked her under the chin, saying—

'Cheer up, my dear; you haven't turned out so ill-favoured as we expected.'

Nannie raised a proud little head, and fixed her eyes on her father's.

'I won't eat a bit in this house,' she said, 'till I know what you all mean. Patty, will you show me some place upstairs where I can be quiet and alone?'

'By ——, you shall sit at table when I bid you,' roared the farmer; but Nannie did not listen, nor did she hear her father call after her as she left the hall, 'Don't you come down no more in those play-acting clothes, Nan, and cut off them red locks. However you come by 'em, I won't have no flaunting of them in my house; at least, not till you've wedded your hunchback.'

Nannie was taken to a pleasant enough little chamber looking out towards the sea, and Patty, slightly more gracious now, said they had intended to send for her to-morrow, and marvelled she had not been up to see them the day they had arrived.

'Patty,' interrupted Nannie, 'what is it father and you think I have done? I have done nothing, Patty! Alick never asked me to marry him till this evening. I never thought of such a thing. I said, No. Of course I said, No. And I have no home but this, Patty, for I can't go back there now he thinks of that. But I said, No. Why is father angry?'

'My dear, he wishes you to marry Alick,' replied Patty.

'But I can't,' cried Nannie, vehemently; 'I don't want ever to marry anybody at all. Why does father not like me for a daughter? Is it because mother died when I was a baby? I couldn't help it. I wish I had mother to-night. *She* would never have spoken to me so, and have looked at me so, when I have done nothing!'

'It was only some tipsy nonsense of Aunt Ann's,' said Patty. 'I was surprised at father taking notice of it.'

'Patty, you must tell me. About my behaviour, father said? Oh, what could any one say about me! and—and—Alick is it, Patty? I used to go about with him—yes—I thought he was just like my own brother——'

'Aunt Ann said nothing about Alick. She didn't mention his name. But I'm afraid, Nannie, your own words show you have been very light. It was Sir Vincent told us about you and Alick.' And Patty looked at the girl searchingly.

'Sir Vincent!' Nannie grew scarlet of course; any ready blusher will understand that. But Patty had never blushed in her life, and her sister's sudden glow frightened her.

'Was there ever anything between Sir Vincent and you, Nannie?' said the elder sister.

'I don't know what you mean! Between Sir Vincent and *me?* Why, how could there be?' cried Nannie.

There was a moment's silence, Patty feeling herself far too young and inexperienced to deal with a case of this kind.

'Patty, I must know; you *must* tell me what makes you say such things,' said Nannie, with forced calm.

'My dear, I am very sorry if it vexes you, but motherless girls like us have to be put on our guard. And I do think father was so wrong to let you come to this savage place, and with Aunt Ann got into such shocking ways. And you never told us. For shame, Nannie; that wasn't like a proper-minded girl.'

'Oh, never mind about Aunt Ann now! I want to know what made you say—what made you think such things about Sir Vincent.'

'Well, Nan, he spoke of you to us, and Caroline and me did think he seemed a bit inclined to notice you, which would be dreadfully improper of him, you know.'

'He never noticed me!' said Nannie of the flaming cheeks, tossing her head.

'We spoke of it together,' continued Patty, 'but not very much, for at that time we never fancied a member of our family could be anything but conducted. We forgot, my dear, how young you were, and always

a handful, Nannie; and away among wild people—we didn't know how wild and misbehaving——'

'You needn't go out of your way to abuse all my friends!' cried Nannie; 'I love them all dearly!'

'Then Sir Vincent persuaded father to come here. We wondered why——'

'He wanted a good farmer to put on the land,' interrupted the girl.

'There! you see you *have* talked to him,' said Patty, triumphantly.

'It is all perfectly simple,' said Nannie. 'Why should you suppose Sir Vincent had any extraordinary motive?'

'We didn't think so, till we heard Aunt Ann go on about Sir Vincent and you.'

'About Sir Vincent and me?—*me*, Patty? Patty, I am very fond of Aunt Ann. I know her and love her, and she is Alick's mother, and has been very kind to me; but it doesn't do to believe all she says, especially when she——'

'Is drunk,' said Patty; 'you seem quite used to that. For shame, Nannie! She wasn't actually drunk, or we shouldn't have let her into the house, nasty woman. And we didn't notice all she said, but it just set us thinking; and so now, you see, my dear, why we are all anxious you should get married to Alick, as he is willing to have you,' ended Patty, condescendingly.

'I'll never marry Alick just because folk have

said what isn't true,' said Nannie, shaking all over with wrath. 'None of that is true about Sir Vincent. He has spoken to me sometimes. I suppose he'd speak to you if he met you, wouldn't he?'

'Oh, I'm different,' said Miss Randle; 'no man alive could ever take liberties with me. And as to you, Nannie, you aren't pretty enough for men to notice you, without you make them. Caroline now —it isn't her fault if they look at her sometimes. It's a distress to her.'

'Patty,' said Nannie, abruptly, 'you have made me so angry, so insulted like, that if I had anywhere to go, I'd leave the house and go right off this very minute. And I'll do it, I will indeed, if I'm spoken to this fashion again.' And the girl pushed her half-frightened elder away, and only waited till she was alone to burst into a storm of frantic tears. Nannie blew out her candle and sat by the open window, her bare elbows on the sill and her chin resting on her hands, while she watched the moon sailing over the heavens, making an island of purple light in the gray sky and a long, shimmering, golden path across the sea. Sailing down it she could discern the black forms of the fishing-boats; and close at hand was the dark outline of the glen's rugged sides, framing that vision of the moonlight and the sea. Nannie gazed at it and thought—oh, so wearily and anxiously! How often good people

by well-meant interference strengthen the very ideas they wish to destroy. Nannie had long thought of Sir Vincent Leicester, but to-night her thoughts of him took a new meaning. Then he had not looked at her and spoken to her as he looked at and spoke to Patty? And she herself—no, she would never, never, never be able to think of him as that cold sister of hers contrived to do. 'Has she no eyes?' thought Nannie; 'how can she help seeing he is quite, quite different from John, or Alick, or any one? And how can one help *liking* best any one who *is* the best, and the noblest, and the—the most *beautiful* person,' said little Nannie, 'one has ever seen? I don't believe it is wrong. Oh, how I wish I had been born a lady! No one would have thought it wrong then!' And she rose and paced the room with a sense of being caged, like a wild beast at a fair.

'Oh, what has Alick gone and spoiled everything for!' she said to herself. 'I didn't know an offer was a thing to make one so angry. I should have thought it would feel nice; and when it came from any one I am fond of too, like Alick! And I half promised that some day I'd have him, and father wishes it! Oh dear! I hope no one will ever make me an offer again,' said the poor little virgin; 'it is dreadful to be made so angry!' The sense of being caged grew too strong for Nannie. She hated the little strange

room and the house where people thought untrue things of her. And the moon looked so bright over the sea, and the air in the wild valley smelt so sweet. There was a stair just outside her room which led to the back door. It was open, as Nannie knew by the fresh draught which blew in her face as she peered down the darkened staircase. She slipped out cautiously, silently, secretly, crying to herself—she who had never cried in that manner before, and had had no sorrows of her own worse than a dull negative sort of occasional heartache, because she had no mother and her father did not love her, and life with her aunt was sometimes sordid and always a little laborious. 'Shall I go home to her now?' she asked herself as she went out. 'Alick would *never* let folk say untrue things of me. Oh dear! I don't know if it *is* all quite untrue! Perhaps it is *that*, that which makes me angry with Alick and makes me not want to be his wife.'

Vincent was beside her. Wandering about, his dog at his heels, no longer elated, but glad to be back at Everwell; alarmed by the attraction the place and its inhabitants—one inhabitant—had for him, Vincent found himself suddenly and unexpectedly in the presence of the very person of whom he was thinking; who was Everwell to him—the magnet. He had seen her this evening in her lover's presence, and had been as properly indifferent in his manner

as even Alick could wish; but he had gone home with a great suspicion that, after all, his six months' flight had not done much—had not eradicated the poison from the arrow of Eros. And now here she was before him; and she was alone and in tears.

'Nannie!' exclaimed Vincent, and stopped quite abruptly and unintentionally by her side. Nannie started, and her tears ceased, as tears will at a sudden change of thought. For a few minutes they were both speechless, and they looked at each other embarrassed, half guilty and wholly delighted, as they had looked at each other once or twice before. That sort of mute conversation a few times repeated tells a great deal. After it there was little matter what were the few trivial sentences which they exchanged, each a little hurried and panting, and feeling that it was best to say whatever came into their heads so as to take away any significance from that impulsive greeting. But somehow Nannie knew that he was trembling as much as she; and when he had gone on his way, he looked back once and saw her still standing where he had left her, her light figure conspicuous in the moonlight.

Nannie did not cry again. She sat down on a low moss-covered rock, smiling to herself as she traced curious circles on the ground with her foot; thinking, not very intelligibly; hardly thinking, only

feeling comforted and a little disappointed; a little frightened and a little guilty, but glad on the whole, and *quite* sure now that she couldn't and wouldn't and shouldn't cast her admiration for the greatest and noblest of the sons of men out of her aspiring and foolish heart. You see, Nannie had read plays in Miss Verrill's lumber-room, where she was a privileged visitor; and she knew how Viola loved the duke and Helena wanted the count, which was all one like loving a bright particular star. And she had no mother to explain to her that that kind of thing is all wrong in the nineteenth century. Patty gave her the information far too roughly; and Nannie did not feel at all enamoured of propriety as presented in the person of her staid and excellent eldest sister. It were far preferable, she thought, to resemble Viola. But at last Nannie saw her brother John coming towards her, smart, and vulgar, and as unromantic as Patty. And all her bright dreams faded away, and she recognised that she, with her red hair, could never be anything to Sir Vincent, and that he didn't care a button for her —not one button; never had done so; never, never would do so. And she would be very silly indeed to waste her affections on him; and her family would not think her 'conducted' if they knew, and Alick would break his heart. Would it, I wonder, have distressed John Randle to understand the effect his

dapper appearance and smug expression produced on the innocent heart of his little sister?

She fled back to her own room before he had seen her.

CHAPTER VI

SEE Sir Vincent Leicester's dogcart spinning across the moor between Tanswick and Everwell; and Mr. Bryant, who has not yet had time to provide his wife with her pony-carriage, driving, with a keen sense of delight in the fast-trotting chestnut mare and his own impromptu skill in handling the reins. He feels a different man from the mere hard-working London parson in the shabby coat and up to his eyes in business. Here he is half a country gentleman. Everwell is not populous, and he will inevitably have leisure; and Mr. Bryant has never consorted with people of leisure. It has come to be synonymous for him with birth, breeding, station, society, honour—matters which till now he has only been admonished of far off.

There is a remarkably handsome young lady by his side, and Mr. Bryant is more delighted and surprised by her than by his own skill in driving and his own opening leisure. How his heart beats when she says caressingly and with genuine satis-

faction, 'Really, papa, I had no idea you knew so much about driving. Where did you learn it? And how nice you look with that beard! I had quite forgotten what you were like.'

Ah, she was a beautiful creature! The father surveyed her and no longer saw the smallest incongruity in Sir Vincent's proposals. She was a thousand times prettier than ever her uninteresting mother had been; handsomer than Emma in her fairest days. Poor, dear Emma! Mr. Bryant felt with an uneasy qualm, that the stepmother would seem plain and homely to this splendid girl.

About a mile from the vicarage, when they were close to the Heights, Lady Katharine and her son came towards them taking a stroll. Now there was nothing in the whole day so enjoyable to the widow as that walk or drive with her son, and Vincent seldom failed to present himself for it. Lady Katharine at these times was always in her happiest mood, beaming upon the whole world. And so she smiled now upon Mr. Bryant and Georgina—dear! what a beautiful girl!—so warmly, that the clergyman instinctively checked the mare; and then the pedestrians stopped too, and he sprang down from the cart to converse with them, and Georgina was left enthroned above and alone. The young people both became scarlet at sight of each other, for both remembered very decided faithlessness to the affec-

tion they had entertained at parting, and which they proposed now promptly to renew. And the two parents, seeing the blushes, sought each other's eye, and in a moment understood everything perfectly, and even exchanged an involuntary smile. Lady Katharine, caught in a benevolent mood, had committed herself irrevocably to Georgina's cause. As to Vincent, he shook hands with Georgina and introduced her to his mother with an air of pride, evidently no longer caring to conceal his admiration. For no one could see her, so he argued, without admitting that he had selected precisely the most admirable and suitable wife in the kingdom; and he only wished they were already engaged. Surely if they were, his erring fancy would keep to its true allegiance!

No one at the moment had the faintest recollection of the homely stepmother except Mr. Bryant himself, and he hoped 'it was no matter.' Georgina's figure, style, and manner more than made up for any deficiencies in the dear woman.

But now something occurred, very disturbing to one member of this happy family party. Georgina, queen-like, leaning out of the dogcart with her hand patronisingly on her father's shoulder, while she talked familiarly, almost amorously, with Sir Vincent, saw another pair of people approaching; evidently another mother and son, for the stout

middle-aged woman was leaning on the very respectable young man, who carried her bundle and basket, and was talking to her as he led her along.

'What a delightfully funny couple, Vincent!' said Miss Bryant, and the Christian name was noted by the listening parents; 'I am certain that is your protégé, the painter.'

'Alick Randle,' admitted Vincent, and the whole party directed their looks to the newcomers. Mr. Bryant, who till now had believed Alick's name to be Leach, felt his heart suddenly stop beating as he heard the word Randle and saw the woman—the very woman! And Vincent was saying carelessly, 'That is his mother whom I told you of. She takes a drop too much now and then, and is rather a thorn in Alick's side. Ah, she is aiming at you, Mr. Bryant. She was inclined to claim acquaintance with you rather.' It is not too much to assert that Mr. Bryant felt a strong wish for an earthquake at this moment; but being a man of self-control and presence of mind, he merely answered calmly and pleasantly—

'Some old friend of mine? From my parish in London, can it be? Good evening, Alick. I hear your mother thinks she remembers me. Where have we met, my good friend? I shall be delighted to renew our acquaintance.'

It was a most extraordinary position he was

in, and would have been disconcerting to a man of firmer fibre. On the one side was his brilliant daughter, with her Paris hat and intimacy with the peerage, all but engaged too to the young baronet, who seemed to Mr. Bryant a greater prince than he really was; on the other, the fat, common woman, who took a drop too much sometimes, and was not only a near relation, but had helped him to do away with Mary Smith. That was the transaction which started up involuntarily before his mind at sight of the woman, for he had had no dealings with her on any other occasion. And that was the one action of his life which he felt to be for ever unpardonable. Mr. Bryant expected to find himself lying in a moment. It really would be impossible to own *that* woman. Further than the lie he did not see. But Ann had plenty of mother-wit about her of an inverted description; she saw that Mr. Bryant was not for recognition, and lying, as we know, presented no difficulty to her.

'It ain't the same,' she said, addressing Alick; 'my Bryant had yellow hair and a snubbed nose.' Georgina tittered, and Mr. Bryant took courage.

'Where did you see him, my friend?' he said. 'Did you say he was a relative?'

Alick frowned now, expecting the dubious brother-in-law to be brought up, and Mr. Bryant trembled, but he felt it absolutely necessary to know

what the woman had said. Mrs. Leach understood him completely.

'I didn't. Did I, sir? I never made so bold. I said, "Sir Vincent," said I, "I once sat under a man named Bryant with a snubbed nose. He went to London, but I suppose London is a big town, and if there's one parson in it named Bryant there is two dozen." I didn't say another word, Sir Vincent and Alick; now did I?'

'Not even so much, Mrs. Leach,' said Vincent; 'you didn't mention the snubbed nose.' And the incident ended. Alick dragged his mother on, and Mr. Bryant breathed more freely. He joined in the young people's laugh; but without the most distant feeling of amusement.

CHAPTER VII

Oh, how my poor Emma had thought of Georgina, who was coming home to be her daughter!

She was so long choosing a room for the girl that the housemaid got quite impatient; she took the curtains in hand herself—gaudy chintz with large pink roses over it; the new wall-paper having great roses too, so nearly the same colour that Emma and the housemaid considered them 'a lovely match.'

'I declare, it looks quite a bower!' said Mrs. Bryant, admiringly. The cherished daughter must have, too, her own little table made of Christmas cards, and a scrap-screen also made by herself for a bazaar and unsold. The scraps were mounted on Turkey-red, and the Christmas cards were finished off with a royal blue fringe, neither of which looked particularly well beside the rosy curtains; but Mrs. Bryant did not think of that, and only saw the 'lovely pictures.' For the walls, there were a few chromo-lithographs in gilt frames purloined also from her own bedroom; and finally she exclaimed, 'I think I will give her my bird, Jane!' with the delight of sudden inspiration. The white cat followed the rival pet into the new, smart room. He had been greatly put out by the move from London, and had roamed disconsolately about the house, finding no place sufficiently comfortable for him, till he observed the eider-down on Georgina's bed. Even Mr. Bryant had long given up contending with that cat, who was of opinion that the establishment belonged to him, and that he condescendingly kept five or six persons to pet him. Neither Jane nor Mrs. Bryant attempted to oust him now from his new position, nor dreamed that any one could be unflattered by his favour. And then Mrs. Bryant went away to dress for receiving her stepdaughter.

She had pulled down her scanty hair, and

enveloped herself in an old white dressing-jacket, when a loud noise and a cry from Georgina's room brought her running thither in dismay. Jane had been piling up the fire to the great furnace a servant naturally makes on a June day, when—this was her account—she saw a great nasty 'hearwig' running over the ceiling; so she up with the broom 'andle laying there 'andy and struck a great blow at the intruder, which fell upon Jack's white 'ead, making him swear 'horful.' Alas! rather more fell than the earwig: down came a great piece of the plaster, falling on the new curtains and the white sheets and the red eider-down, and powdering over the bright new carpet and the table of Christmas cards. Jane, too, in her terror, knocked over the jug, and its contents were losing themselves in all directions over the uneven floor. The room was a scene of dire confusion, over which Jerry, the thrush, sang his loudest.

'Jane!' exclaimed Mrs. Bryant, 'I do think you are the most aggravating girl I ever saw!'

This conspicuous failure was unbearable. Georgina would think she had taken no pains, and the little table was quite destroyed. Mrs. Bryant began to cry, and Jane went into a passion; said she didn't care a rap for all the Miss Georginas in the world, and would leave the house and get a mistress who was civil.

'Jane, Jane,' cried Emma, in an agony, 'she'll be here in a minute! Get a dust-pan and clear it up.'

'Clear it up yourself, ma'am,' said Jane. 'I don't wish to aggravate you no further;' and she flounced out of the room, after giving another needless poke to the unnecessary fire.

'Cook, cook,' called Mrs. Bryant, 'do come and help me!' But the cook was in the garden gathering parsley, and Jane, without relenting, sat down to make herself some tea. Poor Emma, her eyes streaming with tears and her brow with heat, set to work herself; but she had not half done when the dogcart drove up to the door, and Georgina and her father got down and came in.

'Welcome, my dearest child, welcome,' said Mr. Bryant, and kissed her; 'we are not quite straight yet, you see.'

'I do see,' said Georgina, looking round with some contempt, not lost upon her father. Where was Mrs. Bryant?

'Emma, Emma, my love!' he called. 'Here we are! Georgie has come.' He was a little put out. That incident *en route* had tried him very much. 'Where is your mistress, Jane?'

'Dunno, I'm sure, sir,' said Jane, with a toss of her head.

'I begin to think Mrs. Bryant is dead, papa,'

said Georgina, flippantly. 'You haven't said a word about her, and now she has vanished.'

'Emma,' shouted Mr. Bryant again, 'come down at once.'

She dared not disobey; besides, she was longing to see her dear daughter. Her hands white with the fallen plaster, her face red and tear-stained, her grizzled hair hanging, and her old morning-dress half hidden by the cotton jacket, the poor, self-forgetful, eager, tired woman presented herself before the fashionable Georgina. She certainly was a strange figure. Georgina stared at her for a moment, then burst into a fit of hearty laughter.

So lately had Mr. Bryant disowned his sister-in-law, that disowning seemed natural; before his fine daughter he would at that moment have disowned his humble wife if he could. Yet he stepped forward as usual, the dear woman's protector. She had fled before the girl's contemptuous laugh, and he went after her, kindly, sympathetically, consolingly. After a time he rejoined his daughter, and explaining to her the disaster in her room, took the opportunity to deliver what he meant for a very severe little sermon.

'My dearest child,' he said, 'you know, at least I hope you know, that we are very plain people, and have not had your advantages of education and society. You will have to put up with us as we

are, and I must insist upon it that you do not fail in the respect due to your father and his wife.'

Georgina made a little grimace. Then she put her hands on his arm, and looked up in his face archly, and turned him round, so that together they faced the mirror. 'I don't think we are plain people at all, papa, you and I,' she said, caressingly. However, she apologised in a kind of way, and was very prettily behaved when at last she kissed her stepmother properly, and consented to follow her to the apartment so anxiously prepared and now somewhat shorn of its splendours.

But she was not at all so pretty to Mrs. Bryant when out of her father's sight.

'Dear, what a hot room!' she exclaimed, truly enough, for the fire was the one really successful and triumphant thing; 'and what a noisy bird! He makes my head split.'

Then the girl surveyed the room, and noticed all the pink roses and the gaudy carpet. Mrs. Bryant thought with keen expectation that now she was going to express admiration. Not one word. Georgina shrugged her shoulders.

'What is that on my bed?' she exclaimed; 'a cat? Oh, take it away! There is no creature I dislike so much as a cat.'

'I am so sorry, my love,' said Mrs. Bryant, lifting Jack with great tenderness. 'Your pa is so

fond of the cat, he lets him lay anywhere, and we take no notice. He's a very good, pleasant cat and never has a flea, nor looks at the bird, nor anything.' And setting him down on the floor, she opened the door for him to make a graceful exit. Naturally Mr. Jack made for the soft eider-down again. Georgina snatched up a towel and struck the animal a smart blow, whereupon he would have scratched her if Mrs. Bryant had not courageously interposed.

'I feel quite agitated,' said Georgina, sinking into an arm-chair; 'and the heat of this stuffy room makes me faint. You will have to get rid of that cat,' said the stepdaughter; 'Finette will not endure it.'

'What is Finette, my love?'

'My dog, of course.'

'Have you brought a dog, Georgie dear? I hope it is clean and doesn't bark much. Your pa is not very partial to dogs.'

'I suppose you mean you are not,' said the outspoken Georgina, with the laugh which enchanted her lovers, but which was disconcerting to a timid woman like Emma.

'But is the dog coming in the luggage, love?'

'My maid is bringing her. Where is my maid's room?'

'Oh my, Georgie!' exclaimed Mrs. Bryant, 'you haven't been and brought a maid surely! We can't have a maid. There is no place for her to sleep, and

they do quarrel with the other servants so. Jane is very easy upset as it is.'

'Really? And is Jane a fixture? Of course I must have a maid. I can't do my hair myself. I'll run down and speak to papa about it.'

'Oh no, my love, please don't do that. I will manage it somehow, if you must have her. But would it do if I waited on you myself? I'll unpin your hair for you now, if you will let me.'

'No, thank you,' said Georgina, in a tone of disgust, and glancing at her stepmother's tasteless cap and grizzled chignon.

'It will be very hard to feel respect for that woman,' thought Georgina. 'Dear me! how ever did my handsome, delightful papa come to marry such a woman as that? Who is my papa? There is a pleasing vagueness about his early history. I had better talk of my mother's relations as much as I can. I declare that woman is enough to turn Vincent against me. How on earth am I to get rid of her?'

For the present there was truce. The maid was accommodated with the spare room (until after a few days she was dismissed by Mr. Bryant for insolence to his wife), Jack was turned into the stable lest he should frighten Finette, and Georgina, dressed in satin, came down to dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Bryant, who were in their morning clothes, and

indeed were going to church. The arrangement suited Miss Bryant, who felt pretty sure her lover would look in, and who wanted to give him her opinion of her stepmother. Meanwhile she behaved very nicely to that lady, and flirted most perseveringly and successfully with her papa.

But that laugh of Georgina's upon entering had left its effect. Mrs. Bryant indeed, humble, undignified, and prompt to forgive, partially forgot it; her husband, never. He had defended his wife and reproved the girl; but for all that, victory lay with Georgina. Mr. Bryant did not in his heart forgive Emma's blundering welcome; he did forgive Georgina her laugh. Undoubtedly, she was superior in a hundred ways to poor, dear Emma. She was a magnificent creature. How good of her to be so pleasant to her dull, old, parsonical parents! And what credit would accrue to the new vicar of Everwell for being the father of the loveliest girl in the county! Alas for Mr. Bryant! Yesterday the good of his parishioners had been his chief desire. His head was full of sermons, and lectures, and temperance meetings, and sacraments; and how even Sir Vincent was showing signs of grace, and Alick Leach was a saint from whom he might learn himself. Georgina with her French fashions had sown a whole crop of new and worldly ideas.

CHAPTER VIII

VINCENT had turned in at the vicarage almost every evening since the arrival of the new clergyman. Going thither was virtuous, for it prevented his loitering about in the glen where he had found sweet Nannie in tears; it was pleasant also, for going and coming he had to cross the said glen, and always with an undefined hope that she might be at the crossing. Lady Katharine was amused to find her son required a little urging to go to the vicarage to-night. However, he went. It was the right thing to do, for did he not intend to marry Georgina? He did, and for two reasons: first, he had arranged with himself to do so, and Vincent had a strong will; secondly, he regarded Georgina as a bulwark of defence against Nannie. For reason told him that nothing could be more desirable and nothing more probable than that the fashionable lady should in every way eclipse the country maid; in Georgina's society Nannie would be forgotten. Vincent was desperately alarmed about himself at present, like a man convinced that he has a mortal disease. One only specific for his complaint presented itself, and he clutched at it greedily. It was Georgina. He was ready to marry her to-morrow if she could

cure him of this mad passion for which change of air had effected nothing whatever.

Georgina beckoned him to a seat at her side, and she lounged in a low chair, displaying a pretty foot, and pulling Finette's ears, with a languishing air of 'Come woo me! come woo me!' while all the time she was studying her suitor closely, and coming to a few conclusions about him, not altogether remote from the truth. For though presuming, Georgina was clever; and she soon perceived that Vincent had changed. He had come this evening not to make love but to criticise; he was entertained perhaps, but his pulse was unfluttered, his heart was at leisure. He would need a little persistent courting, she suspected, before she got him up to the mark. Well, no matter; it was only a matter of time, for Georgina knew herself an adept at the art of courtship. For to-night—she was not especially successful. Vincent recognised the fact with a sigh; yet gladly too. He had been jealous for Nannie!

'Tell me,' said Georgina, 'what made you bring papa here?'

'I wanted a good parson,' said Vincent; not at all what she had meant him to say.

'Fancy you caring about parsons!' cried Georgina, clapping her hands.

'Why not? These people here seemed in want of some theology, or whatever it is.'

'I haven't gone in for it. And I don't believe you have either, sir.'

'Oh, I suppose one acquires some sort of practical theology unconsciously, enough to keep one going; some sense of higher powers to be reverenced, and of a standard of decency. I should hope your father would hammer that much into the heads of the people here, for I begin to think, without it men are only a rather uninteresting sort of brute.'

'You remind me of Lord Cookham,' said Georgina. Vincent coloured.

'I suppose one turns that sort of thing over in one's mind now and then,' he said. 'I imagine definite ideas on those points pertain in some way to one's gentility.'

'Gentility. What a word! It would do for Mrs. Bryant.' Georgina was silent for a moment. She was anxious to inform her lover that she disapproved of her stepmother; it was obvious that he must do so. 'I feel like a little girl in papa's Sunday school!' cried Georgina. 'Please, teacher, what do you mean by gentility?' Vincent was not going to be accused a second time of resembling Lord Cookham, and held his peace.

'I was hoping,' said Georgina, sarcastically, 'that you would favour me with some charitable definition, wide enough to embrace even my stepmother.' And she laughed. Vincent was silent,

and did not think the remark in the best taste. It was the second little jar.

'You are not amusing,' said Georgina with a graceful yawn. 'You stayed away from church to come to see me, but I didn't stay away to be preached at by you. Tell me something more interesting.'

'What shall I tell you?' said Vincent, stupidly; and she stamped her foot with vexation.

'Oh, more about yourself, sir; or your home, or your friends. By the way, who was that very pretty girl who ran out of the glen and kissed the great fat woman after she had tried to claim papa's acquaintance?' Vincent felt annoyed all over, and no longer in the least inclined to talk to Georgina.

'I shouldn't have thought you near enough to know if she were pretty or ugly,' he said, evasively. Georgina laughed. She knew a discussion of female beauty was an useful topic with an admirer.

'I saw she was pretty chiefly by the expression in your eyes, my friend, as you watched her. Perhaps you don't know what a tell-tale countenance you have?'

'Miss Bryant——' began Vincent, strongly tempted to say something rude.

That unlucky allusion to Nannie destroyed the work of Georgina's whole evening. It irritated him out of all sense of his companion's attractions. He was like a person with a raw place, a touch to which sets every nerve quivering.

CHAPTER IX

THE church was very empty, and Mr. Bryant cut his discourse short, but made it very plain and pointed, as he well knew how. Approbation was written on every line of Alick's eager, sharp-featured face. He seemed stationed there to keep the preacher up to the mark; and it was well, or Mr. Bryant's thoughts would certainly have wandered; for there was that terrible woman, Ann, sitting before him with a curious delighted expression, and every now and then a glance at the unconscious Emma, which sent a cold shudder down Mr. Bryant's back. When he had pronounced the blessing, he stepped, still in his surplice, to his wife's side, and bade her go home at once in charge of the sexton. Then he whispered to Mrs. Leach that he would follow her to her house and speak to her now, if she could give him ten minutes in private. Ann agreed, and winked at him with a delightful sense of intrigue. Then he talked pleasantly for a few minutes to Alick, who was going to hold a prayer meeting and who had a girl with him, one of his sisters probably, to whom Mr. Bryant paid no attention whatever.

'Where was the great congregation you promised me, Alick?' said the clergyman, in his genial way.

'Folk who've been toiling won't walk two and a half miles of an evening, sir, without there's an awful sense of starvation. That hasn't come to a many of them yet. But if you would join us on the beach, sir——'

'On the beach? What! do you meet there in the rain?'

'It do seem a damping sort of thing on prayers, sir,' said Alick, regretfully.

'Take your flock into the new schoolhouse,' said Mr. Bryant; 'don't wait for me, but I may perhaps look in presently.'

'We have been praying for a good minister, sir,' said Alick, 'and I'm thinking our prayers have been answered.'

'God grant it may prove so, my man,' said Mr. Bryant, with fervour, for somehow he was not feeling a particularly good minister to-night.

At last the coast was clear, and Mr. Bryant made his despondent way to Mrs. Leach.

What was he going to say? He really did not know. He was going to see how the land lay, and to come to some understanding with her. If she had only turned up a day or two sooner, before Georgina had appeared on the scene; if he had not met her for the first time in public; if she were not that devout man Alick's mother; if he and she had not that ignoble secret between them about

Mary Smith—— Good heavens, was it possible that that early, long dead and buried and forgotten trouble was going to make its presence felt again? And just now when such fair winds were filling his sails, and he had believed himself embarked on so prosperous a voyage! It was horrible to think of.

'And how is my poor dear Emma?' asked Mrs. Leach. 'I see she has fallen into flesh since I saw her, and is a good full of a doorway like myself.'

'Look here now,' said the clergyman, abruptly, 'how do you come to be here?'

'It's course of nature,' replied Ann, rubbing her hands with appreciation of the joke, 'seeing I was bred here and wed here, and have put two husbands into the tombs here. How do *you* come to be here, that's the thing?'

Mr. Bryant thought it decent to ask for the good folk at Faverton Farm, and Ann was voluble about them; but, true to her character of secret woman, she refrained from mentioning that they had left their native place.

'We have, partly by accident, cut all connection with the farm,' said Mr. Bryant. 'Our walks in life are different, and I cannot endure harrowing memories for my dear wife.' After a while, he ventured to ask if Ann was going to bring 'this matter forward.' She replied that she was a very truthful woman, and didn't see her way to concealing

it. Mr. Bryant hesitated, and then she said impressively—

'I'm a poor struggling widow, Mr. Bryant, with my family to think of and a dreadful delicate son,—my poor Alick, sir, who has always one head in the grave; and the others are young and brought up too respectable for hard work. I have a deal of anxiety.'

'Oh well, perhaps I can help you,' said Mr. Bryant; 'I shall be very glad to do so. But listen now.' Mrs. Leach sat down just in front of him, spread her hands on her knees, and looked up in his face with an air of profound attention. She was in every way disgusting to Mr. Bryant. He tried to explain what a great man he was—an awkward sort of thing to say; and about his lady daughter, who had mixed in the highest society, and was on the eve of contracting a brilliant marriage.

'Ay, marrying is good,' said Ann; 'I always tell the lasses so. I wouldn't like to hinder the pretty dear!'

'And what is of more importance, Ann—here I do expect you to understand my meaning—is my dear, ill-treated wife's unfortunate early history. I am not exaggerating when I say that in our position, if it became known, it would ruin her. That is why I have thought it advisable to sever all connection with Emma's relations.'

'And there was the child too,' said Mrs. Leach reflectively.

'Good gracious, yes! Do you suppose I have forgotten it?' said the tortured man, rising and walking about, feeling sick with regret and worry.

'Ann,' he said seriously, 'could anything induce you to leave Everwell?'

'To go where, sir?' asked Mrs. Leach eagerly.

'Wherever you please. To London, Cornwall, New Zealand. I would arrange it all for you.'

'And pay my way?'

'Yes, I would. Under certain conditions.'

'You might give me the money,' suggested Ann; 'it's a mighty convenient thing, especially when it ain't mentioned to Alick, who always steals it for missionaries. And you could stay here and I could stay here, and we'd never say a word of having seen each other afore. I'm a great girl for keeping secrets. Have I ever told one of your secrets, even without a consideration for keeping them?'

'I'm sure I hope you have not,' said Mr. Bryant. 'No, Ann, that sort of plot is not to be thought of. It is odious, unworthy, dangerous. No, no. Emigration is best—quite the best thing for you and all your family.'

'No, sir,' said Ann, 'I couldn't do nowhere away from Everwell. Law now, you don't understand it; why, if I was cast adrift without my Alick and the

girl he's meaning to get married to, I shouldn't wonder if I got a liking for a taste of drink sometimes. I shouldn't indeed.'

'My good woman,' said Mr. Bryant, eagerly, 'you would be far better off in some other place. Emigration is the great remedy for poverty, and for all the temptations which poverty brings. Think it over. Don't be alarmed by difficulties. I have helped scores of people to emigrate, and my assistance to you of course would be material. Think it over.'

He did not despair of persuading her to go. At any rate he refused consent to her suggestion; that is as to putting it into practice for a permanence. He did buy her silence for a few days by a present to-night.

It was a most detestable situation for a clergyman and a gentleman. But surely it was necessary? If she were allowed to talk, she would most certainly tell all: that Emma, at whom Georgina and others already looked askance, was sister-in-law to this vulgar, greasy, ignorant tippler; that he himself was the son of a grocer; that Emma was the mother of a nameless child; and that he and the greasy tippler between them had palmed the baby off on somebody else. The last fact he could not bear to confess even to himself. To know that he was living in the same place with a person who knew of it was unendurable.

Ann must go; and till she went, to buy her

silence was mere matter of necessity. He had no other resource.

The interview, so terribly agitating to Mr. Bryant, had only lasted twenty minutes, and when he left the house, which was nearly opposite the new schoolhouse, Alick had not long collected his flock from the beach and the street, and begun his meeting. As he had entered the temple he had happened to look in at his mother's window, and had seen, to his no small surprise, that the clergyman was there : a fact which set him thinking.

CHAPTER X

When Mr. Bryant came out he ran up against Sir Vincent, and started as if caught in some wrong action. It was some minutes before he convinced himself that his young friend saw nothing strange in his presence in the street at this hour. Anxious to seem on duty bent, he proposed that they should both slip unseen into the schoolhouse through the classroom, and learn for themselves how and what Alick taught the people. Vincent was rather curious on the subject himself, and agreed. The clergyman wanted time to collect his thoughts, to consider what he had done and what he was going to do. He had no intention of listening to the

preaching, especially from the lips of the son of his enemy. Yet after a few minutes he did listen, and so did Vincent. As I have said before, no one found it easy to be ten minutes in Alick's presence without watching and hearing him.

There were about thirty persons assembled; two or three fishermen and one lad recovering from an accident, and unable to take his place in the boats. He, by the way, attributed his cure vociferously to Alick Randle's prayer. The rest were chiefly women, fairly well-to-do, from the most respectable shopkeeping people of the place. Dr. Verrill also was present with his pipe of home-grown tobacco. Alick was addressing this little company, all of whom were listening with keen attention, and occasionally joining in.

'Sir,' said Alick, addressing the doctor, 'I'm a specimen of those folk. They are my brothers and sisters. Life for a working man is a constant struggle not to slip down among them. Some of us does it every day.'

'Ay, ay,' grumbled one old man, 'according to you we are all going straight to the devil. You want to start the world afresh, you do.' Alick caught at the word.

'There's only one way of starting the world afresh: by bringing it back to God. We all want it, rich and poor alike, clean and unclean.

Two men 'll never be brothers till they are both sons of God.' Vincent glanced at his companion, who smiled and nodded, but had not begun to listen yet. So far Alick's countenance and voice were more impressive than what he said. Still every one wanted to hear him out. 'Do you know what Christ said to the rich man?' continued the speaker, evidently feeling himself addressing the wealthy part of the community, though unaware of his two gentleman hearers; 'the command's plain enough, and if we don't do it, it's because we have no feeling for Christ. "Sell all that thou hast and give to the poor, and come and follow me."'

'I ain't a-going to do that!' called out the miserly old lady who kept the bakery. Alick fixed his melancholy eyes on her as he continued vehemently—

'I tell you, you have no feeling for Christ; no sense of sin, no hatred of the world, the flesh, and the devil. You are a willing slave. That kind goeth not forth but by prayer and fasting. Oh,' he cried, joining his hands and raising them stiffly above his head, 'you *may* be safe for this world with your education and your civil ways and your natural goodness, but it's a broken staff to lean upon even here; but there, *there*—if you have no better stay, you will be cast out eternally and will fall headlong into utter destruction.' A cry from the old baker woman was quite sufficiently startling. There was

a pause, during which Alick stood with his hands crossed on his chest, and his eyes blazing as they gazed upward. 'May God in His mercy enlighten you,' he cried at length. 'Look here, friends; two years ago I was walking straight down into the pit, and then there came a day when God spoke to me as He spoke to Adam, coming to him in the cool of the evening and saying, "Man, where are thou? What doest thou here?" He says it to me again to-night. He says it now. Here. To every one in this house, which we have built for His presence. Where He is present. Man, what doest thou here? Man, what doest thou here? How many of us have an answer ready for that question? . . .' Presently he resumed: 'Three days I lay under conviction, crying to Him for mercy. I was heartsick. I had visions of hell and of Satan, and of the darkness and the horror outside of God's presence. Then the day dawned, and the day-star arose in my heart. Oh the bliss and the light and the glory of that dawn! It showed me heaven; and since then my heart has been sick still, but with desire for the King in His beauty,—for the land that is very far off. Some others of you have felt it. I would have you all feel it. My God, I would have you all feel it. My God, my God, it cuts me through the heart to think there is one in this room, burdened and sin stained, with wings that

cannot fly and a soul that cannot rise; tempted, assailed, vanquished by the Evil One, because he will not turn to Thee for strength, and wisdom, and sevenfold might. That any day, to-morrow it may be, to-night—oh my God, to-night! he may die and sink into a grave eternal and without a hope;—when he might have risen with Christ to sit at Thy right hand in the heavenly places; where there is light for evermore, and lo! a great multitude which no man can number; of all nations and kindred, and people and tongues; which stand before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes and palms in their hands.'

The words dropped from Alick with the cadence of loftiest melody. His singular voice and the judgment in his punctuation and emphasis gave at once the full sense and the full music of which the words were capable, and stirred with strange and unwonted sympathy the hearts of his hearers. He went on, losing his argument in the fascination of the triumphant poetry; "They shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. And the gates shall not be shut at all by day: for there shall be no night *there;* and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light! And his servants shall *serve* him!" said Alick, with the agonising cry of one who is trying

to serve and making frequent failure; '"and they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads." But——' there was a long pause of shuddering expectation—'*but*—"there shall in *nowise* enter into it *anything* that defileth, neither whatsoever worketh abomination, or maketh a lie. And the time is at hand,"' cried the preacher in a slow distinct tone of horror, 'when "he that is unjust, shall be unjust *still:* and he that is filthy, shall be filthy STILL: and he that is holy shall be holy still. And, behold, He cometh quickly; and His reward is with Him to give unto every man according as his work shall be."'

The thrilling voice ceased, and for a time there was silence, every eye fixed upon Alick with a breathless expectation and resignation to the spell he had woven round their spirits. It was the genius of the actor, not the genius of the divine; but who would perceive that at such a moment? Alick himself would never perceive it. He still stood with his arms crossed and his eyes raised to heaven, and burning with what seemed celestial fire. He moved a little and altered the direction of his gaze to his hearers, through whom passed a perceptible shudder.

And presently, as if the silence and the relentless pressure on their souls had become unbearable, one of the occupants of the benches, the maimed young

fisherman aforementioned, fell on his knees and burst into a low-toned ejaculatory confession of his sins, and supplication for admittance into that mystic city which Alick, the prophet, saw; and a sob ran through the women, as all heads were bent, and fervent Amens added weight to the petition of the spokesman. After which there was more praying from various people, and other demonstrations which made Vincent at any rate uncomfortable. For the physical excitement, which was not without its picturesqueness in Alick Randle's artist nature, became grotesque in Samuel Dykes and his other followers. Probably Nannie thought so too. Vincent had discovered her in the throng watching her cousin uneasily, and obviously feeling herself responsible for him, the colour coming and going in her cheek, and her spirit evidently not joining in the excited supplications.

Alick terminated the proceedings at last with some abruptness, as if unable to bear the agitation longer; and a general sigh, perhaps of relief, perhaps of disappointment, at the conclusion of the meeting, rose from the bent heads. After a short silence, Mr. Bryant, who, whatever his secret emotions, invariably preserved his cheerful and dignified demeanour, stepped from his concealment, shook hands with the retiring company, and dismissed them, for the most part in tears; while Alick sat

shivering in a chair trying to recover himself after so much nervous exhaustion, and no longer attending to anything.

But a rough young woman now made her appearance from the street, with bare arms akimbo, and a coarse face pale with fatigue and anxiety. 'Alick Randle, yo are wanted, man,' she said, pushing forward to the almost prostrated missionary, while the retiring crowd paused to watch this new manifestation; 'mother's down with the faver, and shey waunt bey contant withoät yo com now and spake to God with her, for the doctor has given her oop and shey's mortal afraid to die, and it's only God Almighty can save her now.'

Alick promised, and Mr. Bryant again waved his hand, and induced the people to go. But the poor prophet still crouched quivering in his chair, clutching its arms convulsively, while his dull eyes gazed vacantly before him. Nannie had crossed the room, and now stood beside her cousin, smiling at him, and rubbing his cold trembling hands.

Then Dr. Verrill was seen to advance to the lamp, and take two little phials and a graduated glass from his pocket. He carefully poured out a mixture, shook the glass several times, tasted the contents, and advanced on tiptoe behind Alick, making a sign to Nannie not to speak. When he had got very close, he paused for a moment with his

head on one side, listening to the gasping breath. Then very suddenly, and with a loud and alarming snort, he poured the preparation down the back of the prophet's neck, and went away without awaiting the result.

Alick sat up instantly with apparent restoration of his strength, and much evident annoyance. But Nannie's sunny smile beamed forth, and involuntarily she glanced at the astounded Sir Vincent, and meeting his eye they both went into the heartiest fit of laughter, no doubt a relief after the tension and solemnity of the last hour.

CHAPTER XI

No one could have suspected Mr. Bryant of any oppression to his spirits. But upon entering the house he obeyed the Scriptural injunction; he went into his chamber and shut to the door with the publican's petition on his lips, 'God be merciful to me a sinner.' The rich, wild voice of the village prophet was ringing in his ears, and calling *him* also to repentance and confession. He still heard Alick repeating, 'He that is unjust shall be unjust still,' now with a wail of sorrow, now with the trumpet tones of heavenly wrath. Mr. Bryant was no

hypocrite; not Alick himself had a more thorough belief in the Bible plan of salvation, more conviction of its urgency, more desire for the welfare of his own soul and the souls of those around him. And yet—he had bribed his sister-in-law that very evening to lie for him, and it was not the first time that he and she had plotted together to deceive.

'For my poor Emma's sake,' said Mr. Bryant; 'but oh my God, of Thy mercy's sake, lead me not into temptation now.' He was most entirely in earnest; only he intended his petition to be granted in a particular way; he intended Ann Randle to be got out of Everwell. That would make everything easy, and could not, he thought, do harm to any one.

The next day Alick came to see him. Mr. Bryant trembled in his soul. He felt afraid of Alick. But no one could have guessed it. He talked kindly and patronisingly of the prayer-meeting, the sick woman, Alick's influence over the people and consequent responsibility. Alick, who was essentially meek and was astonished and half alarmed by his own success, was very glad to be instructed. He took out his well-worn Bible and exposed many of his difficulties, asked many explanations, admitted sadly more than one error.

'Come up whenever you like, Alick,' said Mr. Bryant, really interested in the student. 'I shall

always be ready to look over a chapter with you.'

'Thank you heartily, sir,' said Alick. But he stopped abruptly in the middle of a sentence and gazed at his pastor with those eloquent eyes of his before which Mr. Bryant quailed. For there had suddenly struck the young man, and that not for the first time, a suspicion that he had seen this clergyman before. Nonsense! A child's recollection—what was it? He would never have entertained it had not his mother put the idea of the mysterious uncle into his head! And then, not listening as the other went on talking rather hurriedly about predestination, he began to wonder what Mr. Bryant had had to say to Mrs. Leach last evening after church.

'You never see mother afore yesterday, sir, did you?' asked Alick, abruptly.

'What! has she been saying that again?' smiled Mr. Bryant in his pleasant way, but with an instantaneous conviction that Ann had already been false to the compact.

'No, she hasn't said no more about it. Did you ever know her of old, sir?' demanded Alick.

The attack was sudden, and Mr. Bryant was taken at unawares. He was half awed by Alick, and Common-sense whispered, 'You disowned the woman yesterday in this uncompromising man's

hearing: he will despise you, if you confess now.'

'Your mother is an entire stranger to me,' said Mr. Bryant; 'didn't you hear me say so yesterday?'

During the whole of the following week it seemed to the clergyman that he was living two distinct and all but incompatible lives; that, as in some hideous nightmare, he was tossed dangerously from one to the other with imminent risk of catastrophe. When Alick had left him he had learned that the Sandfords, distant relatives of Georgina's Baroness, had come to call, and he hurried to the drawing-room to support his wife. Mrs. Bryant was of course terrified; but her husband and stepdaughter atoned for her deficiencies. Georgina took the measure of these people at once: the ponderous father and mother, well born but insular, provincial, and stupid; the pert, dressy daughter, older than Georgina, but unformed and obviously afraid of the half-foreign beauty. They amused Miss Bryant immensely. She put on her most fashionable manner and talked of things quite beyond the ken of poor Miss Gerty. Her charming condescension to the country folk was such that no one could remember she was the mere daughter of the vicarage. Her whole conversation and manner suggested the Great House. She called Sir Vincent by his Christian name, and mentioned some fancy of his in a matter of sweetmeats, which

betokened great intimacy. Georgina knew perfectly well that her position in the neighbouring society was secured, and that there would be speculation as to her engagement to Sir Vincent. With what delight did her proud father watch her, guessing what the visitors—important people in his eyes—would think!

When they were gone Georgina sat on a foot-stool by his side, stirring his tea for him and laughing up in his face. 'Mamma dear,' said she, and both Mr. Bryant and his wife beamed on her as she said the filial word, 'I am going to make you a new cap. And you kind, dear papa, you'll let me have a grand piano, won't you? And this table mustn't be here. It is in the way. I don't like the red carpet and the green curtains. I suppose it is only a temporary arrangement?'

'Oh yes, only temporary,' said the clergyman, to his wife's astonishment and dismay. But how nice Georgie had spoken to her! She was going to be her daughter after all! When they were alone Mrs. Bryant took courage to address her.

'My dear,' said the simple woman, 'I have a terrible quantity of sewing to do. I wonder now do you understand a sewing machine?'

'I?' said Georgina, 'certainly not. I have never had occasion to do needlework.'

'But, my dear, instead of making me a cap——' began Mrs. Bryant, timidly.

'I am going to make you a new cap,' said Georgina, calmly, 'because the one you are wearing is not fit to be seen. I am not going to do any *unnecessary* work. You have made difficulties about my maid, Mrs. Bryant; it will prevent future misunderstandings if I tell you at once, I am not going to act as lady's maid to *you*.' Mrs. Bryant was thunderstruck. Georgina had been so pleasant to her all day in her father's presence!

'Bless me, Georgie,' she whimpered, 'what have I done that you should speak to me in that fashion?'

'What fashion? By the way, the next time visitors come, I hope you will allow me to pour out the tea. *I* have some notion how it ought to be done.'

'I shall tell your pa how rude you are,' said Mrs. Bryant; much the sort of threat she would make to Jane.

'Do. Papa will advise you to learn the right way of pouring tea;' which was exactly what happened. Mr. Bryant patted his daughter's cheek —she brought the matter forward herself—said he hoped she would give him also lessons in manners, and insisted on treating the whole affair as a joke. But this time he omitted privately to caution Georgina against hurting her stepmother's feelings, and he felt greatly vexed with Emma for having

committed herself in the administration of tea to Mrs. Sandford.

That was one of his lives, centering round Georgina; two days after he was again roughly tossed into the other, which had for its centre the dead child Mary Smith.

He was going from house to house introducing himself to his parishioners, and wherever he went he was leaving a good impression. He had pockets full of lollipops and threepenny bits for the children, tobacco for the men, and genial words of affectionate advice for everybody. Alick had successfully prepared his way. The only thing was, and he recognised a certain comicality in the fact, that as yet he was Alick's adjutant, not Alick his.

'Perhaps these people will not be quite so full of Alick,' he said to himself, referring to his notebook as he paused outside the door of the Home Farm; 'they are newcomers, but I see Leicester has not told me their name.' He rang the bell, and was admitted by a smart and handsome young lady, who sent for her father, and talked affably about the weather and the state of affairs in Egypt. Mr. Bryant was trying gracefully to discover the name of the family when who should enter from the garden but Alick Randle himself—and with him the sunny-faced girl who had attended him at the prayer meeting. At the same moment a gruff voice was heard outside—

'Patty, woman, Joe tells me the minister has come. Where have they put um and what does he want with me? Why couldn't he step down the meadow without interrupting my woork, if he can leave hisn so easy?'

Alick noticed that Mr. Bryant turned pale, and even made a movement to escape; but the farmer and his eldest daughter were already in the room.

'Where is the parson?' said Benjamin Randle; 'Nan says his name is Bryant. Let me look at him? Ay, he's Bryant sure enough.'

The two men stared at each other helplessly, and all the young people stared at them. Alick alone had the clue to the scene, and overwhelming despair filled his soul. The man who had come to teach him holiness and to show Christ to the benighted children of Everwell was just a common liar!

The farmer turned all the lads and lasses out of the room, bidding his trusty Patty to remain within call; then shut the door and threw his huge bulk upon a settle.

'Who the devil has played us this trick?' he said, savagely.

'You have no conception of the awkward position your unexpected presence places me in,' groaned poor Mr. Bryant.

'Ay, it's d—d awkward to be confronted by unrespectable relations,' said the farmer; 'so you've

brought my sister in my way again, have you?'

'That woman Ann——' began Mr. Bryant.

'Ay, ay, if I'd known the ticket she was,' Mr. Randle agreed, 'I'd have kept out of her neighbourhood too. I was took in by that psalm-singing son of hers, and that red girl of mine, who's vulgar minded and put up with dirt and drink to get her fling away from us. I'm going to pay her out by marrying her to the Methody, and if she gets him into trouble, I'll wash my hands of it.' Mr. Bryant did not follow all this.

'I suppose Sir Vincent knows that woman Ann is related to you?' he interrupted.

'Why in coorse he does. He's a rare 'un; not much like that easy old father of his. This chap knows every mother's son in Everwell (and the lasses too, more nor he ought, I expect); and what they have for dinner, and how many pound every man's arm can lift. Why, he'll talk to you as sensible of potatoes as if he'd been dropping 'em all his life. "Don't you leave that upland to the west pasture another year," says he to me yesterday; "the constitootion of that bit of land will make mangel if you'll give it—" I forget the name of the stuff; some of your foreign chemicals. How's he learnt all that, tell me now? But I'll bet you two and sixpence he's light. I haven't caught him out in a mistake yet.

And you'd think he was all for horses and pleasure boats.'

Mr. Bryant plunged into an explanation of the blunder he had made. He described the encounter on the road with Ann reeling drunk, which was an exaggeration; 'I really hadn't the face to own her then,' said Mr. Bryant; and Randle laughed and slapped his knee.

'Just like you, Ned! Just like you!' he said.

'Oh well, be reasonable,' resumed the clergyman, offended; 'I thought of explaining privately to Sir Vincent.'

'I bet you didn't,' said the farmer; 'you thought of explaining privately to Ann.'

It was certainly humiliating to Mr. Bryant, but he had to confess that this was precisely what he had done. The whole tone of the conversation was offensive to the clergyman, who had grown used to soft-toned admiration from bishops and baronets.

'I'd a deal rather do with you,' said Randle, 'if you were a natural kind of chap who kep a grocery like your father. You've perked yourself up, and that precious wife of yours, and got mixed with the gentry in a way I can't abide; and I'd a deal sooner you kep out of my light. You'll come to grief some day, and I don't want to have folk saying, "Them pair of humbugs is your brother and sister, Ben Randle." They'll be asking me if I'm

an honest man next.' In these unpleasant observations Mr. Bryant saw a glimmer of hope.

'Indeed, Ben, we both had reasons for being best separate. In my dear wife's interest——'

'In your dear wife's interest and for the sake of shaking you off my back, I kept that red-haired brat,' interposed the farmer; 'I'm a man of deeds, not words. But deeds ain't good for nothing, if you come putting Emma back in my pocket when I thought I'd done with her.'

'Good heavens, what brat?' asked Mr. Bryant, turning cold.

'Her,' said the farmer, pointing with his thumb to the garden, 'who's out kissing the humpy. She's ready to kiss any one with hair on his face. It's in her blood.'

'What do you mean? What girl is that with Alick?'

'Nannie, they call her; mine and Sarah's girl, Nannie. It's my belief she wasn't never christened Nannie. It's my belief, Ned Bryant, that woman Ann buried the wrong un, and it's you ought to have been chargeable for the red hair, as you took the mother and all her belongings.'

'But what insane delusion is this, Ben? You were in the house—you——'

'When a man has a good wife and he's losing of her, he don't trouble himself about babies. He leaves 'em to the nurse. I don't say as Ann did it a purpose. One baby's as like another as two ears

of corn. She may ha' been tipsy without our knowing it, and muddled 'em.'

'But what in the world makes you think so?' asked Mr. Bryant, somewhat relieved; '*I* saw the dead child. Don't you remember?'

'I ain't going to take your word for it. There isn't a man alive could identify a baby. I don't remember either of 'em having red hair in those days. Anyhow my child hadn't. What makes me think it? The way the girl has turned out. She's light in her ways—not like Sarah's daughters; and she has red hair. She's like Emma. Don't you see it?'

'No, I don't,' said Mr. Bryant; 'I think she is like your wife. I noticed the likeness yesterday, before I had any reason to connect her with you.' Mr. Randle laughed.

'I do sincerely beg of you,' said Mr. Bryant, 'not to put such an idea into Emma's head, unless you wish the whole thing brought forward.'

'Ay, Emma's like to tell every one everything. That's why I don't want her within a hundred mile of me.'

Mr. Bryant walked about the room in great agitation.

'Ben, is there any necessity to mention any of this matter—our—ahem—relationship, I mean—beyond the family?' The farmer slapped his knee again, with his loud cackle of laughter.

'I thought you were driving at that,' said he; 'I have known you and your notions a long time, Ned Bryant. I was expecting you to end up with some speech of this kind, my fine gentleman.'

Mr. Bryant winced. He had always detested the coarseness of this brother-in-law.

'I must leave the place the first moment I decently can,' he said to himself as he was walking away, returning as quickly as he could to his other life; for he had promised to call for his wife and Georgina, who were spending the afternoon at the Heights. How soothing it was to his tortured soul to find himself once more in the society of ladies and gentlemen!

CHAPTER XII

VINCENT LEICESTER also was getting some experience of living two lives.

'Sir,' Alick had said to him, 'I deceived you a bit when we parted in the winter, and my conscience won't let me keep the deception up, though it's more other folk's interests it would serve than my own.'

'Well?' said the gentleman easily.

'I told you, sir, as you'll remember, that me and Nannie was sweethearts; that she was going to

wed me. That was the deception, sir; it's hard for me to confess it.'

'Changed your mind?' asked Vincent. Perhaps he overdid his careless aspect, for Alick answered angrily—

'Changed my mind? Do you think that's the sort I am? No, but I spoke more certain than I had ought. I hadn't asked the lass then, and when I came to ask her, she wouldn't have me.'

'Oh,' said Vincent, still unmoved; 'then if you will take my advice, you will ask her again. Let us hope *she* will change her mind. That is a woman's way.' Altogether too light and cynical for Alick's comprehension. He maintained a sulky silence for a minute, then said—

'It makes no difference to any of the rest of what I tried to say to you that night, sir;' and was going out, but Vincent stopped him.

'Wait a minute. I am not going to have any repetition of that impertinence, Alick,' he said; 'I looked over it once, but I shall not look over it a second time. Do you hear me?'

'Ay,' said Alick, sulkily. 'In so far as I did you wrong, sir, I ask your pardon.'

Vincent opened the door himself and motioned him out. Then he stood at the bookcase, whistling, and aimlessly taking volumes down, clapping the dust out of them and putting them up again.

'What difference does it make to me?' he said to himself angrily; '*I* can't have her. I wish to Heaven I had never seen her.' And then he had to join his mother for the entertaining of Georgina Bryant, his future wife.

Georgina's entry into what she regarded as her certain home made a little sensation. The Sandfords were there, and two or three young men, very satisfactory to the beauty. She had dressed herself with care, in a plainly-made dress of becoming colour, which fitted her, to use her tailor's phrase, as if she were melted into it. When she came in, Vincent did feel a certain movement of admiration, and planted himself deliberately by her side, with a short sensation of triumph upon which he congratulated himself heartily. How delighted was Georgina to be openly appropriated by Sir Vincent in this way, and how Miss Gerty Sandford envied her, as the young men hovered round her; envied her ease too, her evident habit of reigning. She was quite like Lady Leicester already. Every one noticed it, and there was not a person in the room who didn't think young Sir Vincent had chosen remarkably well.

'Did you say she was an heiress?' whispered young Lockwood to old Mr. Sandford.

'Oh yes; fortune secured to her from my relative the new Countess of Cookham. Only here

on a visit. The attraction pretty evident, eh? A most suitable thing for them both. He's a very nice lad—very nice; and she's a thoroughbred nice girl.'

Mr. Lockwood and his brother went home and told that the Bryants were not the kind of people they had supposed, but connected with the Leicesters and Lady Cookham; and Miss Bryant was an heiress, and the handsomest girl within a hundred miles, and, it appeared, engaged to Leicester himself. Lord George Frere, who was staying at Everwell, drew up a report much the same; only, being a great friend of Vincent's and knowing his moods and manners, he was not positive that the engagement was a settled thing. There seemed something a little galvanic about the man's part of the flirtation. As time went on he got to look even a little bored. And alas for his self-gratulation! Vincent was bored. After the first minute's triumph Georgina's sarcastic laugh vexed him; he did not like the way she snubbed old Sandford. He caught her making eyes at George Frere, and began to think her eyes were bold. She chaffed him and he answered seriously; she spoke seriously and he answered in jest. In the middle of the talk he was seized with a wish to gallop off Tanswick way, and see if he had been understood about some trees he wanted cleared near the site of the projected watering-place. Were all these people never going away?

There was no doubt at all about it, Georgina had lost her charm.

All the while Miss Sandford was neglected, so Lady Katharine intervened in her behalf, and sent them all out to play tennis. Gertrude was a brilliant player, and her spirits rose with the hope of at last outshining that Frenchified Miss Bryant. But over the whole party failure reigned triumphant. As they went out Georgina walked with her lover, but he would talk all the way over his shoulder with young Lockwood about right angles and marking machines. Gerty struck in describing her method of measuring a court; but nobody listened, and Georgina made her furious by a laugh of derision. Vincent was so sulky that he made up the set without himself, at which there was such an outcry that both the Lockwoods took offence, and moreover they were 'out' with each other, each thinking that the beauty exhibited preference for his brother. Georgina played ill; her eye was untrained, and she objected to heating herself and stretching her dresses; yet little Gerty found her most brilliant strokes unnoticed, while her very partner and all the spectators cried 'Played!' every time Georgina touched the ball to send it to entirely the wrong place, and 'Hard lines!' whenever she missed it. Even mild old Mr. Sandford, who was proud of his daughter's play, was irritated. 'Does it occur to you, madam,' he said,

addressing the unobtrusive but very uncomfortable Mrs. Bryant, 'that the decadence in the manners of our young men has any connection with all this tennis? In my day we treated a lady as a lady, but then we were never tempted to forget she was one by entering into a contest of agility with her.'

Poor Emma, who could hardly manage to keep her grammar correct, was not at all prepared to be a censor of manners. She tried to turn the subject, and showed every one she had never heard of this fashionable amusement before. 'It's something like battledore,' she said, 'but I wonder they don't send it straighter at each other. We used to keep the shuttlecock up ever so long by playing slowly and carefully.' And this speech annoyed Mr. Bryant, who had just come, and who was not sure that battledore had ever been fashionable in polite circles.

Georgina refused to play again, and Gertrude having hesitated modestly and not having been pressed, the four men made up an ill-tempered set alone. Georgina asked Lady Katharine to show her the conservatory, and went away alone with the widow. 'Don't let it be "Miss Bryant" again,' said the girl; 'I cannot feel you a stranger, dear Lady Katharine. Vincent has told me so much of you!' Then she blushed and looked down and said in a faltering voice, 'You know your son and I have been Vincent and Georgina to each other for

so long.' The widow was much touched. She took the young hand in hers.

'My dearest child, I know, I know. He told me himself.'

How beautiful was the shy, startled Georgina! 'Oh, but I didn't mean *that*. I didn't mean to allude to *that*. What must you have thought of me! I only meant that he and I were very great friends. But not anything else, you know. Oh no; only cousins and—and—*very* great friends.' And she sighed pensively. Lady Katharine kissed her.

'I am afraid, dear child, that Vincent won't be content with that,' she whispered, smiling.

That talk with the mother-in-law elect was satisfactory, but the lover himself was not satisfactory at all. Even Mr. Bryant noticed it. And Georgina, the moment she was out of the great people's sight, let herself look low-spirited, discomfited, and cross.

Altogether the party broke up uncomfortably in the extreme. Even Lady Katharine had discerned ill-humour in the air.

CHAPTER XIII

THE company of bores were no sooner gone than Vincent was off like a shot. He forgot all about dinner, an aberration which had never in his life

occurred to him before, and for which old John alone was able to account; he concluded unhesitatingly that his master had been listening to Alick Randle and had got Conviction.

'Marry Georgina?' Vincent said to himself as he plunged out; 'never! Why, I nearly hate her. She doesn't amuse me a bit. I dislike her. She has no heart. She is a humbug. She isn't a quarter as handsome as I thought. How could I ever have fancied myself in love with her?'

What a sad falling off was this after the movement of admiration he had been so pleased with on the day of her arrival Each time he had seen her since he had admired her less, and no self-persuasion could blind him to the fact. He took his little boat and rowed himself savagely out to sea. It was the time when the strand was deserted, about an hour before the cobles would put out for the night's fishing. One or two women with coils of nets round them were passing backwards and forwards between the dye-works and the boats; a few children played on the sand. Otherwise there was little sign of life about the place. The tide was out, and the low, shaly rocks which the people called the Scar, were uncovered. Vincent rounded the point to the absolute solitude of the next little bay, where was no landing except on these quickly covered rocks, for the cliff came sheer down to the

high-tide water mark. But his eye caught a figure there, standing on the edge of the waves, and watching the splashing and tumbling of the incoming surf, golden in the evening glow. She was quite alone. Vincent shipped his oars and watched her. Presently she retreated a little, and sat under a great rock before which was a glorious sea-weedy pool, never emptied by the tide, and gorgeous with all manner of ocean jewels and flowers.

Vincent was reckless to-night and his resolution was taken in a moment. He landed, secured his boat, and joined her. Had she not said long ago that she came sometimes of an evening to look at the waves? And had he not ever since intended some day to join her in that solitude of sky and sea, where old ocean and the friendly cliffs conspired to secure them from intruders?

Nannie wore the stuff dress like Patty's which her father had ordered, but she had not cut her hair. On the contrary, tired of the prim hat which had replaced the sun-bonnet, she had laid it on the ground, and had unfastened the despised red locks, which floated round her now like a sunset cloud. Her eyes had the depth and the colour of the evening sea, yet shone with a starry radiance. There was always a suggestion of purple about Nannie; in the depths of those long-lashed eyes, in the veins on her white temples, in the shadows of

her shining hair; to-night she had emphasized it by a string of purple beads round her throat where Patty had desired a linen collar. The beads had been tied there by her little cousin Mary Anne and were mere glass penny beads; the girl's beauty changed them to amethysts. Thinking herself alone, she had taken off her stockings to stand in the tumbling wavelets. When she saw Sir Vincent approaching she coloured, but was not disquieted by her little bare white feet, as she would have been upon discovery by Alick—Alick, whose only idea of bare feet was that they were naked, and pertained to the bold lasses of the fishing village which needed reformation. Nannie couldn't resist a faint smile as she got up and made a sort of curtsy, coquettish enough in its mingled respect and friendliness. Patty or Caroline would as soon have thought of curtsying to Sir Vincent as of going to dine with him; and he smiled at the ceremony from Nannie. 'Pray sit down again,' said the gentleman, and stretched himself on a rock at a little distance, where he could watch her. I cannot undertake to explain what Nannie was thinking of as she sat silently there, and knew that he was watching her; a mysterious little smile was lurking round her pretty lips; but I am much afraid she would not have obeyed him so readily had she not known this part of the shore, ever unvisited at this hour by persons of her

acquaintance. She remembered defiantly the censure and warnings of her family as she looked at Sir Vincent, and secure in her admiration, she felt it a point of honour to trust him implicitly. And Vincent felt all the vexation and discomfort and anxiety of a day spent in a false worship roll off his soul while a calm and beatitude unspeakable wrapped him in a golden mist of delight. Only nothing was farther from his thoughts than any love-making. That was impossible between them, and he did not wish even to suggest it to Nannie. So there was a long space of pleasant silence. And neither of them realised —Nannie from inexperience; Vincent from the different experience natural to polished society—what advances in courtship can be made without the assistance of a single syllable. However, after a time they felt a necessity for irrelevant speech.

'You have run away from your family to-night, Miss Nannie?'

'I came, sir, to see if Maggie's mother wanted me again. You know I stayed with her last night after the prayer meeting.'

'Are you so fond of sick people?'

'No. I like well people best.'

'And she didn't make you stay to-night?'

'No. She is getting quite well. She was sitting up eating and laughing. Do you know, sir, she says Alick cured her! She was like dying

when he and I went in last night. But Alick prayed very earnestly and laid his hand on her, and anointed her with oil like it says in James. Even Dr. Verrill thinks she will do now. Please, sir, do you think it can be so? That Alick's prayer cured her?'

'More likely the stopping of Dr. Verrill's medicine,' said Vincent. 'Pray what does Alick think of it now?'

'He is not surprised at her getting well. He showed me a verse in Mark: "He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved" (*he* means everybody; we all know that. But it goes on). "These signs shall follow them that believe" (Alick says that *must* mean everybody too). "In my name they shall cast out devils, and speak with tongues, and drink deadly things; and they shall lay hands on the sick and they shall recover." I didn't know what to say when Alick showed me that verse. What would you have said, please, sir?' asked Nannie, eagerly.

'I should have asked him if he spoke with tongues.'

'But he says he could, if it was really wanted for God's glory! He says it is faith. "If ye have faith as a mustard seed, ye shall move mountains."'

'Do you believe it yourself, Nannie?'

'No. I can't somehow. I should never have faith enough, sir; never—I should say, "As I

expected, the mountain hasn't stirred!" But Alick has faith, and indeed that woman is getting quite well!'

'A regular, terrifying, potent magician, Nannie.'

'Oh, please sir, do tell me what I ought to think about it,' pleaded Nannie.

'I don't profess to understand. You had better consult Mr. Bryant.'

'But, sir, don't you think prayers are answered?'

'I haven't the smallest idea. I never met with the question or thought about such things at all till I came to Everwell.'

'Didn't you?' said Nannie, shocked. Vincent laughed.

'You and Alick think of them too much, I suspect. However, I presume the human soul is bound to feel after the gods. People saw that very early. The Jews said that man was made in the divine image, and the old Greeks had another fable; Psyche, that is the soul, was a mortal maid, but her mate was a god, and he carried her to heaven at last.'

'Oh, I know all about that!' cried Nannie breathlessly, 'I have oh such a pretty book Miss Verrill threw away. It is called the *Earthly Paradise*. And it tells about Psyche. And the god was the god of Love!'

'Yes,' said Vincent. And then there was silence,

for the word Love had been spoken, and it seemed to chase away all others. But alas for the barrier between them! Neither of them dared to pursue or to manifest the train of thoughts that little word had called up. Only Vincent breathed hard and looked at this fair creature beside him, bathed as she was in the golden sunlight, and the glory of youth, and the glow of youth's awakening passion.

By this time he was sitting on the rock at her side, and his arm stole out to go round her. But he refrained, and jumping to his feet, stood for a long while looking at the incoming waves, while unutterable wishes and impracticable fancies chased each other through his head. He was startled by a cry from Nannie, as a large wave falling on her left side sent the spray as far as to her feet.

'Oh the tide! the tide!' she cried, half laughing and clasping her hands; 'we have forgotten all about it, and now I don't know how to get round the point.'

Vincent turned. 'In my boat, Nannie. There is no danger. Don't be frightened.' And he held out his hand reassuringly. Nannie pushed it away with the lightest touch of her slender fingers, and moved backwards, laughing and blushing.

'I am not frightened one bit! But I think I had better wade through the water and swim a

little way. Father wouldn't like me to go in your boat.'

'Why not?' said Vincent, with so prosaic an air that Nannie grew still rosier, and felt it would be very awkward to explain. 'Your father couldn't like you to sit here for six hours even *alone*,' said the young man, audaciously, 'or to be drowned at the point, or dragged ashore by your hair in the grasp of those bathing little boys on the pier. Jump in, Nannie, and do what I tell you, or you'll upset the boat. How pretty——'

'What?' said Nannie, pausing as she stood on the rower's seat holding his hand.

'I was going to remark what pretty feet you have,' said Vincent, drily, 'but I thought perhaps you'd be angry.'

'Yes, I am very angry,' said Nannie, sitting down demurely where she was bidden.

He hoisted the sail, and they scudded away swiftly over the lonely waves. They did not talk any more, but they were both radiantly happy, and would have liked to speed on for ever thus—together, over the purple sea, under a golden sky. Vincent watched her pretty closely, and Nannie kept her eyes down, only very occasionally stealing a glance at her companion, and doing her very best to overcome the little smile that dimpled her cheek. Vincent tacked several times unnecessarily; but

they arrived at the shore half-way to Tanswick far too soon. Nannie sprang lightly on the beach, and when Vincent repeated—

'What pretty feet you have!' she only laughed softly. Then she said very gravely—

'Good-night, sir, and thank you.'

'Sha'n't I walk up with you? It's a long way.'

'No, thank you, sir. Please will you listen to me now for a minute,' and through her merry smile was an air of terrific resolution. 'I sha'n't come down at this hour on the scar any more to be caught by the tide. And I'm *never* going in yon boat. Never again.'

'Bless me, Nannie! Why not?'

'Never again,' repeated Nannie; 'it—it makes me sea-sick.' And she couldn't help laughing a little, and Vincent laughed too.

'You look very rosy considering you are sea-sick!' he said, just tapping her cheek with his finger, and then he turned back and got into his boat again, and sailed away out to sea, forgetting all about dinner, as I have said. By degrees his smile, which long lingered, faded away in the seriousness of reflection. 'I have not done much good by running away,' he said to himself. 'Well, the running-away style of warfare was never the one which attracted me most. I will face this

matter and see what comes of it. But to begin with, I will make a solemn vow, taking this sky and this sea to witness, that I will do Nannie no harm. She is as innocent as my mother; and by Heaven I will never make her otherwise.'

PART IV

BASCIANTE

Faërie Queene, book iii. canto i. verse 45.

CHAPTER I

THE sun rises each morning and disperses the morning mist, and climbs 'the high-up heavenly hill,' sending his beams far through transparent blue or hiding them behind curtains of coming storm, all just as he has done a thousand times before; quite careless that there are restless hearts sick to death of regularity and calm, weary sufferers crying for the end of all things, happy souls who, like Joshua, bid the great lamp stand still; and young hopeful children of fortune who would hurry the wheels of his chariot, because though they are well now they think to be better by and by. And when the day comes which is to make some change, to begin a new order of things in some folk's lives, that unfeeling old sun who sees it all, gives never a sign of emotion, but goes on with his work just as usual; the eternal model of patience, fidelity, and absolute self-control. It was one of these eventful days which dawned at Everwell.

Alick Randle was standing at the door of

his workshop, his face haggard as after a long night's watching. In very truth he had not slept. By a path that he knew not it seemed his God was leading him, and his earthly part shrank back from the unknown, over which, however, streamed for him an unearthly light. Was it a Will-o'-the-wisp? a lighthouse on a fatal rock? a candle for a moth? or was it in very truth the Pillar of Fire lighted by God's own hand to point out the way? Alick had agonized in prayer all night for guidance, and when the morning came, while it was yet dusk, he saw strange beckoning hands, and heard strange voices saying, 'This is the way; walk thou in it.'

For the fever had been spreading during these few thundery days of premature heat; and Alick had touched the sick other than Maggie's mother; and the report ran now that recovery each time had followed—nay, that in one case the sufferer had seen the holy man enter all transfigured by heavenly radiance, flooding the cottage with golden light, waking jewels in the mud walls, changing the floor to glass, and the hearthstone to jasper, till there was vision of the New Jerusalem, as John saw it in the isle of Patmos; and Alick's voice, which the bystanders had heard breathing a quiet prayer in the name of Christ, had sounded in the sick man's ear as a voice of many waters, saying unto him,

'Thy sins be forgiven thee.' When Alick heard that story he trembled very exceedingly; and he listened when old John Price said he preached a better gospel than the new parson, and when wild Samuel Dykes assured him that God chooseth the weak of the world to confound the mighty. The whole village came to the meeting that night, for the conviction had spread like wildfire that the divine finger had showed itself, and that the pestilence and the signs and the wonders were a warning and a voice from heaven. And before Alick appeared Samuel Dykes rose up, strongly impressed, he said, by the spirit, and addressed the people; preaching unto them less the one great Allah than Alick Randle his prophet:—till everything ordinary in Alick's career, everything capable of a natural explanation was forgotten and nothing was kept in view but his mysterious superiority. Among ignorant people any strong impression is infectious. Alick himself was not so superior to those about him as to resist the infection of their belief, when upon joining the assembly he was greeted with a shout almost of worship. He had dreamed so long of being a prophet, a teacher set apart by Heaven for a peculiar service, that he was prepared to hear in the *Vox Populi* the *Vox Dei;* and he was ready to obey the call.

But Alick had not that powerful element of

success, an unwavering self-confidence. In his heart he was hesitating now, and praying for a sign. This gift of healing? His transfiguration in the eyes of old Western the fisherman? Alick, the stern truth-teller, had discerned exaggeration in these reports; and he was unable to consult the minister, for, alas! the minister was a liar, and Alick had lost all faith in him. He had to find out the truth for himself. So Alick went to the meeting, and he was stirred to his soul, first by the large attendance and then by the growing enthusiasm and confidence. He prayed aloud; he spoke of sin, and the people wept; of salvation, and they cried, 'Hosanna to him that cometh in the name of the Lord.' He had power, it seemed, to move their souls which way he would. Could he refuse to believe that God was with him? Yet he doubted still; and in the room were two or three who doubted also, and waited to see whereunto this would grow.

And then Alick, half to persuade himself, spoke of the prayer of faith and a God pledged to answer it even to the removing of mountains. Such mountains, thought Alick, as the hardness of godless hearts and the great wickedness of men's corrupted souls. But ah! his hearers were of the earth earthy, and they cared little really for righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost. When Alick spoke of

mountains they thought of Everwell cliffs, and when he spoke of serpents, they remembered the vipers they had found on the moor and the rattlesnakes in spirits of wine which Dr. Verrill kept as chimney ornaments. And now the doubters cried aloud, 'Alick, show us a sign!' and he did not with his Master reply, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeketh after a sign.' For he was himself craving for a sign. Had not the commission of the very Jesus been openly signed and sealed by the Father's audible voice and the descending dove of the presence of the Spirit?

And then the people,—Samuel Dykes, the lean man who had spoken of Alick before his arrival, who was faith and confidence personified, acting as spokesman,—took up the words Alick had just read to them, words which in Alick's voice full of holy awe *were* impressive—had not little Nannie been so impressed by them that she had learned them by heart and repeated them on a not particularly suitable occasion?—and said:

'Alick, it is the Lord's promise that the signs shall follow. Man, wilt thou not show thy faith before the people, and in sight of the sun and the world, drink in God's name of a deadly thing to show it will not hurt thee?'

A strong shudder seized Alick as he turned his mild eyes on the speaker, and he saw the eager faces

around him, and knew they were all waiting his answer. Quick, a prayer for guidance! The eyes were raised to heaven, the nervous hands were crossed upon his breast—

'Lord, I have told that the words are Thine. Shall I doubt them now? Is this Thy call to test me? Is this the seal of my commission? Thou shalt show Thy glory! or I will die for Thee, believing that my death shall glorify Thee.'

There was a hush in the room while Alick spoke, and when he had done there was long silence as of the grave. Then they separated till noon, when the ordeal was to take place. And Alick sent a message to Nannie, bidding her to come to him early.

And then followed the sleepless night of ecstasy; the fear of death, the setting of his things in order, for it seemed to the still doubting Alick that mere death in his Master's cause was to be the end of all his hopes, his aspirations, his many failures, and his sudden success; his prayers and his agonies, his fear of himself and his great faith in God. The end too of his earthly love; his care for Nannie, his pure passion for her, his soul-cleaving to her, which would fain have carried her with him up into the heaven for which he yearned. For Alick had no strong confidence that God would protect his Nannie. It was the remains of the old asceticism.

God had *permitted* His servant's earthly love, but it could not be thought to interest Him! He might forget to take care of Nannie when her lover had gone to be his God's only!

Strange, grotesque, heathenish ignorance and superstition from beginning to end! Yet the obedience, the self-abnegation, and the courage which were needed by a Loyola, a Luther, a Paul, were here in this obscure village prophet. He believed that God had called him, and he rose up to obey.

And the sun rose just as usual and shone on Everwell unfeelingly,—shone on Mr. Bryant considering the dangers he had escaped, and the horrible nest of poor relations into which he had stepped; on Georgina, weaving nets of French fashions for lovers; on Vincent, thinking of Nannie and wishing himself a fisherman; on Nannie, wishing herself a lady and preparing, rather unwillingly, to run off when breakfast was over and see why poor dear Alick wanted her so early. And it shone on a sorrowful ecstatic man; who had seen beckoning hands and heard the call of holy voices; who had risen serene and resolved, yet believing in some confused way that he was called to death and the laying down of all earthly joys; and that the seal of his commission, the sign, the test of his faith, was to be the martyr's triumphant end.

CHAPTER II

He took her aside, and after a brief moment of agitation, told her what had occurred with an unnatural calm which frightened the girl more than any excitement. But Alick did not make his account of the ordeal by poison clear. He talked too much of resigning his life at the call of God, and Nannie did not take in that the people expected to see him live. She thought he was going to be murdered, and his resignation filled her with horror. Was he going out of his mind then?

Nannie darted into her aunt's parlour, found a sheet of paper and wrote, underlining every other word: 'Please, sir, something dreadful is happening; Alick is going to be poisoned. Please, please, sir, come down yourself and stop it.—Nannie.' She snatched the baby from Mary Anne and sent the child with the note to the Heights. 'You will run, Polly. You won't stop a single moment. And you will ask to see Sir Vincent, and will put it into his very own hand yourself.'

But little Mary Anne did linger with a schoolfellow; and at the sweety shop, for Nannie kept her little cousins rich in pennies; and then she stopped on the cliff to watch the boats come in, and

altogether it was past ten before she reached the Heights, and learned that Sir Vincent had gone out. She left the note with John and dawdled home again.

Alick had gone into the workshop to speak to his men, and Nannie, with the baby on her knee, waited with her aunt, and looked with terror at the advancing clock, and at the spectators already beginning to assemble for the miracle at noon. Poor Mrs. Leach was excited and lachrymose.

'I'm mortal afeard at him, Nannie, my lamb,' she said; 'Jim Randle, his da, always said to me, "That boy, Ann, has all your resolution, and a pig's head as well."'

'It's not that, aunt,' said Nannie, mechanically; 'Alick thinks it is *right*.'

'Nan,' said Mrs. Leach, coming nearer, 'do you think it's true that my poor boy with his head is a prophet like Elijah and Jonah? I begin to think so myself. He's wonderful like an angel when his head doesn't put him in tantrums. It 'ud look as if God didn't mind tantrums so much, if He gave him whatever he asked for. Do you think He does?'

'I hope not, aunt.'

'But seeing as you and your father think of marrying him, Nan, it 'ud be a mighty convenient thing in a husband if he could do miracles. You wouldn't never want a doctor for your children,

my dear; and if he could stomach anything, law now, feeding him would be easy.'

'Here is Mary Anne at last!' cried Nannie, jumping up.

How the child's report frightened her! Without hesitation she flew off to the Heights herself.

'My pretty dear,' said John, 'it ain't seemly so many young lasses coming after my young master. I kep your note for Sir Vincent, but I read it first, and I can tell you, my lass, though it's nat'ral you should be in a taking about your sweetheart, I'm glad my young master is gone out till evening by train with Lord George, the noble gentleman; for Sir Vincent is but carnal, and addicted to quenching the Spirit and hindering Alick.'

'Oh, if I had only come myself at first!' cried Nannie, and she went away again, running and crying and panting, and almost praying herself, but for Sir Vincent Leicester's presence.

'Dr. Verrill? Ah yes! A good idea.' Nannie rang violently at the bell of the pink house.

'I can't speak to any one!' called the doctor from an upper window. 'I am making a calculation for a new febrifuge. Go away.'

'Sir, it is life and death with Alick!' cried Nannie, from the road below.

'Oh, pooh! You ought to know his seizures by this time. Go home and put a mustard plaster to his feet.'

'Oh, what shall I do?' sobbed Nannie, as the window slammed down again. 'I will go to the new clergyman!'

Mr. Bryant felt an unconquerable aversion to confronting Nannie. He sent out word that he was always engaged on Friday morning with his sermon, and all business must wait till the afternoon.

There was no time for expostulation. The girl returned to her cousin. She found a crowd, chiefly of fishing people, assembled before the door; and Alick, with his head bare to the sunshine, preaching a farewell sermon. He smiled as he saw Nannie and beckoned her to his side. He took her hand and bending towards her, whispered gently, touched by her distress—

'Nannie, it ain't to the glory of God for thee to cry, but bless thee, my lass, my lass!'

'Oh, Alick, come away!' cried Nannie, beside herself, 'I'll do *anything* for you if only you'll come away!' And then a great terror seized her that Alick would take her at her word, and come down and make her marry him. But Alick gently put her from him.

'Nannie, don't ask me to think thee a tempter, my lassie. I must not sell my soul even for thee.' Then Nannie dashed her tears away and stood up straight.

'I'll never tempt thee, Alick,' she said; 'listen, the clock is striking. Give *me* the poison! I will hand

it to thee myself.' There was sign of disapprobation in the crowd which had watched this strange love scene impatiently; but Samuel Dykes, the lean fanatic, proposer of the ordeal, passed the deadly cup to Nannie, who received it, while Mrs. Leach screamed lustily, setting off Sally and Lizzie, and not a few of the other women and young people standing by. The men, vexed by this commotion, set up a loud-voiced and inharmonious hymn, nervously noisy and dictatorial. Alick alone preserved his seraphic calm. 'Let us pray,' he said, one arm round Nannie's neck and his hand in hers. He had paled as he threw his last look at the sunshine and the sparkling sea, beautiful to his painter's eye, and he did not trust himself to look at Nannie. The crowd sank on their knees and the wailing of the women was conquered by admiration and wonder. Then there was silence and Alick stretched out his hand for the potion.

'Thank thee, my love, my wife!' murmured Alick; for somehow at this supreme moment he could not concentrate his thoughts on heaven, and was thinking far more of his sweet Nannie, submitting to his embrace, and about to be relinquished for ever. All this time the girl had been holding the mug containing the poison and summoning up courage for what she was meaning to do; now, closing her eyes for a moment as if concentrating

her fast ebbing strength, she flung it with all her might against the wall of the house, where it was shivered and broken to atoms.

What followed all seemed like a dream to Nannie, who had exhausted her nervous force, and could have yelled herself into fits like her aunt. She was just conscious of a momentary hush fallen upon the throng, as if they recognised in this interruption the expected miracle; then that Alick was displeased and pushed her from him, and that the crowd caught the infection of his mood, and drove her away. Staggering, trembling, yet content in having accomplished her object, she sank on the doorstep and tried to still her beating heart, and to silence the roaring in her ears. The crowd was disappointed of their show, and there might have been an uproar. But Alick and the lean man were equal to the occasion. Alick knelt again, this time alone, his eyes fixed on the heavens and his arms crossed on his breast. And again silence and calm were restored while the people watched to see what he would do. And Samuel Dykes had had the forethought to bring a second draught of the deadly liquid, which he produced now. Alick drank it.

And horrible fear fell on the assembled throng, and every face turned ashen and every pulse stopped; and these rude villagers realised what they had done. But Alick still knelt in prayer, and was struggling

with a suffocating sensation in his throat, while the fair receding world reeled and danced before his closing eyes, and he heard with eerie distinctness his mother's cries from within the house, and dear Nannie's gasping sobs from where she crouched on the doorstep.

Ten minutes passed of stillness and horror—twenty; and Alick, who had believed himself entered into the Valley of the Shadow of Death, felt, to his amazement, the effects of the dose, or of his fear, passed off.

Explain it how you will: that the stuff was impure and old, that the lean man for reasons of his own had adulterated it or had administered something else; that it was Alick's idiosyncrasy to be able to take that particular poison;—there was only one explanation for him and for the people of Everwell. And so he rose from his knees a new man. Not merely had the oppressive doubts of himself passed away, but a great clearness seemed to have fallen over his whole onward path; scales had dropped from his eyes. He was verily invested with his commission by the divine hand; he was transfigured publicly before all the people.

So he rose, to the strong awe and terror of the crowd; and seeing the eager faces round him, crowding upon him, straining their ears to hear his most trifling word, he began in the power of his

inspiration to preach; but not as before, with supplication and agony; his tone now was one of authority, and his message one of gratulation. Alick's voice rang with triumph, as did Christian's when he emerged from the Valley of Humiliation. Never again would he know perplexity or suffering; fear for himself or others; doubt that the way unknown was in very truth the way of life!

In the middle of which sermon Mr. Bryant came up, listened for a few moments, then felt the proceedings objectionable and tried to disperse the assembly. But Alick Randle looked at him with an expression of opposition altogether new, and continued his address. And the people remained in rapt attention, the attitude of their minds obedient; so that presently Mr. Bryant had to retire, vanquished.

CHAPTER III

We take the events of this strange day as near as possible in the order in which they happened. While Alick was working miracles, Mrs. Bryant with her husband's permission, had been to see her relations at the Farm, and Caroline escorted her part of the way home; *en route* they met Nannie, returning a good deal shaken after her morning, and Caroline introduced her to her aunt.

'I am glad you enjoyed yourself, my dear Emma,' said Mr. Bryant, 'but another time pray do not stay so long. I have been embarrassed by Georgina's curiosity.' He smiled as he spoke, for it had always been Mr. Bryant's habit to smile at his wife, and he was in love with her still in a prosaic, middle-aged sort of way, not incompatible with contentions.

'I wish you would tell Georgie, Ned. If she sees the dear girls here she'll be wondering why I'm so loving to them.'

'I hardly think Georgie would appreciate that blunt, housekeeper-like personage they call Patty. You, as a girl, were singularly unlike that, Emma.'

'I didn't ask her, Ned. I did see *she* wasn't distinguished.'

'Whom have you asked?' questioned Mr. Bryant, sharply.

'Caroline, who you said was something like I was. And the little one, Nannie.'

'Nannie!' Mr. Bryant flung the window open noisily, not sure how to express himself prudently.

'She was the baby when I saw them last. She was the same age as——'

'Emma!'

'I know, Ned. But it gives me an interest in Nannie. And she looked such a lovely creature with beautiful bright hair and such soft eyes, and a

smile like an angel. She's as pretty as Georgina, Ned. I suppose you haven't seen her, or you'd have told me.' This comparison of the terrible child to his daughter was unbearable.

'I won't have that girl coming about here!' he said explosively, his pulse quickening. How inexpressively vexatious of Emma to take a fancy to Nannie! Alick Randle was waiting to see him in the study, and Mr. Bryant went down, reflecting unpleasantly that his second marriage had not turned out so well as he had expected, and half-wishing he had let it alone. Long ago he had been unable to think of Mary Smith without a perceptible diminution of affection for her mother, and now here was Mary Smith by his very side. How was he to endure it?

'Well, my man,' said Mr. Bryant, patronisingly, 'you have come to account for your preaching at that early hour. Sit down.'

'I have other things to say to you, sir,' replied Alick; 'but maybe it will do no harm if I explain the preaching first.' Mr. Bryant looked hard at him, and detected a change in his manner.

'My dear fellow,' said the clergyman, when Alick had impressively described his morning's work, 'I have met with this sort of thing before in my ministerial experience. You are mistaken if you expect sympathy from me; or if you think you

or any one is endowed with miraculous gifts. You have misread your Bible. You had better, if you have really swallowed poison, go off at once and consult Dr. Verrill, or you will find yourself very ill to-morrow, which will not be at all romantic, my friend; not at all.' A prosaic and slightly humorous view of the situation, not likely to commend itself to one so serious as Alick.

'Sir,' said the young man, with unconscious dignity, 'I cannot listen while you blaspheme the power of the Holy Ghost. But I did not come here to talk of myself. I came, in God's name, to reprove you for the lying tongue you have brought among us. Mrs. Bryant was my father's sister, sir,' he said, after a pause.

'Ah, I suspected from your presumption that you had been informed of that fact.'

'And you paid my mother to keep that a secret, sir.'

'To speak plainly, Alick,' said the candid Mr. Bryant, relenting from the severity of his last remark, 'I am ashamed of your mother.'

'When you found my uncle was here too,' continued Alick, 'you trembled. I saw you; I was by, I and the girls. You haven't dared to bribe my uncle, but it seems you have persuaded him also to hold his tongue.'

'Benjamin Randle is aware of reasons which make this our wisest course.'

'What are the reasons?' Mr. Bryant, his arm thrown over the back of his chair, was looking his adversary full in the face with temper, candour, and half-amused patience.

'There is no necessity to impart them to you, my friend,' he said, with a smile. 'Come, do you know that you are making yourself ridiculous?'

'Maybe, sir. But I mean, reasons or no reasons, to step up to Sir Vincent Leicester and to tell him the whole truth.' Mr. Bryant quaked.

'Really? I have no doubt Sir Vincent will be grateful. Suppose you find he knows it already?'

'Don't try befooling me, man,' cried Alick; 'you ain't told Sir Vincent, and you ain't a-going to do it without I make you. But I will have nought to do with the cursed thing. I will have no lie on *my* conscience. I will be no partaker in other men's sins. If you, or some one belonging to you, have done wrong——'

'Before I indulge you in further vituperation,' interrupted the clergyman, sternly, 'I must know what you mean by that insinuation.'

'I know nought against you, sir,' said the man with apologetic humility, 'but I cannot think what else you should want to lie about it for. There ain't nothing to be ashamed of in belonging to working folk. I'd have expected a minister to

see that when our Lord Himself was a carpenter. Sir, there will no good come to Everwell, if him as has been set over us is a humbug and a liar, and I tell you in God's name I will not suffer it to be. Do you understand me, Mr. Bryant? it ain't that I think less of you for being my own kin. It don't bring us no nearer together in the matter of book-learning, and money, and all the things that go to make a gentleman. You'll not find me wanting in respect to all that. But a gentleman has the same need as a common man to be honest; and I will not hesitate to withstand you if you ain't that, which is the A and B of Christianity. I'll give you a day or two to bethink yourself, sir. But after that, whether you have spoken or not, I'll tell my story to Sir Vincent Leicester.'

Mr. Bryant made no attempt at dissuasion. He recognised the pig-headedness long ago discerned in Alick by his father, Jim Randle; and he almost wished he could see signs of the poison taking effect upon him. Alick was not to be influenced by any arguments the clergyman could use, nor to be silenced by any bribe there was to offer. And then there flashed across Mr. Bryant's mind, what in his irritation he had been near forgetting,—a sense of how true were Alick's accusations; how entirely he condemned himself; how miserably he had failed in his duty, not only as a Christian minister, but as a

Christian man. And he remembered how this very Alick, whom he was regarding now with aversion and contempt, had stirred his soul a few nights before; and he recollected with a shudder his own petition, surely sincere? that the path of truth might be made easier for him than the path of lies. The fulfilment had come then?

'Good heavens!' thought Mr. Bryant, 'this man's superstition about direct answers is more reasonable than I supposed. And I—I find the answer intolerable. I prefer the way of deceit! Good heavens!'

Mr. Bryant had 'conviction'; but to keep it up in absolutely pure condition was not easy. The wind of his thoughts began to veer round a little.

'Leave this place I must,' he said within himself, 'but I will do it with dignity, and if possible without sacrificing the interests of my beloved and my most creditable daughter.' And then: 'Merely confessing that I have risen from the ranks is nothing. I have made no secret of it. Yes. I remember distinctly informing Leicester himself of the fact.' But it had been far better for Mr. Bryant if he had admitted to himself candidly that he was very sore about his origin; that he was put out with his wife because she could not so successfully conceal her low birth as could he; that, in fact to establish incon-

testably his position as a gentleman was the very summit of his ambition.

CHAPTER IV

'You must know, John,' said Sir Vincent, angrily, 'that it is preposterous in you to tamper with any one of my letters.' Nevertheless he had presently to appeal to John for an explanation of Nannie's poor little note. John told of the sign and the wonder and the holy man with great unction, and I think expected his master to fall on his knees then and there in holy awe. The effect upon Vincent was different however. He laughed heartily; then sent a message to Tanswick, and himself galloped off towards the village, drawing bridle first at Dr. Verrill's.

'Always delighted to see you, sir,' said the little man, who, having lately adopted a theory that eating and exercise should be simultaneous, was marching up and down his garden, his sister by his side, each with a bowl of odoriferous food in one hand and a spoon in the other. They did not offer to pause for conversation, so Vincent had to join this peripatetic society, and to step out too, for the Verrills were noted for their quick footfall. 'You have

learnt Latin since I have, Sir Vincent; I shall be glad to submit to your criticism a passage, obviously corrupt, in an early horticultural author——'

'I know nothing of horticultural Latin,' interrupted Vincent; 'what is all this about Alick Randle?'

'Alick Randle,' said the doctor, 'is the most valuable subject for experiment. This will be the fifth letter I have written about him to the *London Medical Journal*.'

'Brother,' said Miss Verrill, 'I consider you have been premature. Alick Randle may die to-night.'

'Then I can write a sixth letter to-morrow,' said the doctor, his mouth full of cabbage.

'Have you given him an emetic?' suggested Vincent, laughing.

'No; the news did not reach me till too late. Otherwise he might have taken a decoction of that red agaric. It is the most efficacious emetic I know. But I daresay it would not have answered. Alick is not a good subject for emetics.'

'May I ask what you have done for him?'

'Nothing. A man who can swallow that pernicious drug and not be a corpse in ten minutes, is best left to the doctoring of nature.'

Vincent was powerless over the man of science. 'If you refuse to prescribe for the idiot,' he said,

and he dies, you will have to account for it, won't you?'

Dr. Verrill took out his note-book and wrote down: 'V. L. choleric; eyebrows dark, straight. Not much reasoning power. Shaves excessively, but not entirely.' 'I shall not be the first martyr in the cause of science,' said Dr. Verrill, piously, putting away his memoranda: 'Sir Vincent, if you, or other uninstructed person go doctoring Alick, and he dies, I shall feel it my duty to take proceedings against you. Fools, Sir Vincent, fools rush in where angels fear to tread. But many medical men are not the fools they look, sir; they give bread pills. I admit to having done so myself in my young and cowardly days.' Vincent gave it up, remounted his horse and rode on.

He found Alick kneeling in the new schoolhouse, and about two dozen young lads and lasses watching him. Vincent thought the man was at his devotions, then discovered he was only adding a little decoration to the wall. The spectators took no notice of Sir Vincent; but if Alick licked his brush, or turned his head, they nudged each other and said, 'Lord have mercy! Did you ever?' Now and then Alick said a word in pursuance of a desultory conversation with these persons, though at the moment he was obviously engrossed in his decorating.

'Why, the very disciples, who was far ahead of us, said, "Increase our faith." Ay, they got rich answers, I'm thinking. Do you remember how Peter healed a man lame from his mother's womb, and had an angel come to take him out of prison; and John had a vision of Christ and of the heavenly city such as one would go blind for all one's days after to see?'

Vincent, after waiting for some one to pay attention to his presence, at last advanced. 'I want to speak to you, Alick. What are all these persons doing here? If you come in to see after the cleaning or anything, you had better bring only those whose assistance you require.' And he turned the admirers out, a little roughly. They crowded outside, with the obvious intention of resuming their stare when that interfering long chap had cleared off. Vincent was not unmindful of Alick's growth in imposingness.

'You have wrought a miracle?' he said, seating himself beside the painter.

'By the grace of God, sir,' replied Alick.

'I see no reason myself to think it a miracle. Perhaps you have not considered the hundred and one possible explanations of the event? However, the point at present is, What effect do you intend this strange occurrence to have?' Alick paused to consider before answering this difficult question.

'I trust, sir,' he said, 'that it may lead to holiness in me and to the salvation and sanctification of all the people in Everwell.'

'That is no doubt an excellent and a pious wish,' said Vincent, 'but I don't think those boys and girls I found here were thinking of holiness or caring twopence for salvation, whatever that means. They were trying to get your recipe for such an excellent trick as you performed this morning for their amusement.'

'Sir?'

'Attempts at conjuring of that sort in the hands of performers less skilful than yourself, will, I'm afraid, have disastrous results, and I must prevent any such playing with edged tools by every means in my power. So I have taken a strong measure against you, Alick, as you will see in a minute.'

'Sir,' said Alick, earnestly, 'suppose you found you could do it yourself; that you could say to yon table in God's name, "Be thou removed and cast on the other side of the temple;" and it obeyed, what would you think?'

'The thing is absolutely absurd and impossible,' said Vincent, impatiently.

'Sir, it will do no harm to answer the question,' said Alick, with a touch of his old self-doubt.

'I certainly shouldn't think such a senseless exhibition had any smack of divinity in it. I

should not—at least I hope I should not—employ such a meaningless gift profanely to exalt myself or to make the vulgar stare.'

'Ah, sīr! but if it was a signal of the power of God to raise the eyes of men to Him? or if it was for the good of your fellow-men——'

At this moment the door, which Vincent had locked, was violently assailed, and gave way in what to some persons seemed a miraculous manner, admitting a large concourse of agitated people, who streamed in and surrounded Alick, some standing on the benches, some kneeling before him and clasping his hands, or his knees, or his coat tails. To do the prophet justice, he looked a good deal embarrassed and annoyed. As for Sir Vincent, he was brushed aside like any impertinent dog or spider: the key to the position, however, lay with him, for he presently discovered at the tail of the procession two blank-faced constables from Tanswick, whom he had himself summoned to take Alick in charge for attempted suicide. Sir Vincent entered into conversation with these men, keeping his eye on the culprit, that what he supposed the attempted rescue might not take effect. Now, however, it was observed that the rabble had brought with them a paralysed, semi-idiotic beggar, who was a familiar object on the strand, and a recipient of superstitious affection from the fisher-

men. He had been carried now to be healed; for Alick's allusion to the lame man at the Beautiful gate of the Temple had been a seed dropped on a fruitful ground.

'Policemen, do your duty,' said Vincent. They advanced timorously, looking at each other and at their unresisting prisoner, and at each other again, with growing nervousness. Alick's expressive countenance, however, showed that the fanatic rapture was coming upon him.

'Alick!' cried the beggar's sister, a woman of singularly wild and picturesque aspect; 'oh pray! And it may be thy power of God will save the sinful soul and the sick body!'

'Come now, Alick,' said Vincent, impatiently, 'don't encourage this folly; we've had enough for one day.' Alick turned from him as from a messenger of Satan.

'In the name of Jesus of Nazareth,' he cried, 'I bid thee to rise and walk.' The policemen dropped their prey like a hot potato, and the whole crowd fell on their knees. The pressure of the people straining forward was too strong for the benches, one of which gave way (miraculously, of course) with a great report like that of an earthquake! The paralysed man uttered a loud shriek as of one falling into a fit. For a few moments he lay shaking and rolling; then he, who had not walked

for years (so, at least, he said), struggled to his feet, and propping himself upon his sister, hobbled off towards the door, the whole crowd making way for him, and then closing behind him and following him out, crying, 'Praise God! Hallelujah!' their curiosity taking them, for a time at least, after the healed instead of the healer.

'Do your duty,' repeated Vincent to the policemen. But they stood aside, shaking their heads.

'He is a holy man,' said one.

'He'll bring the house down upon us,' suggested the other.

'Has the whole world gone mad?' exclaimed the gentleman; 'come, Alick, I see you'll have to go with me.'

Now that the excitement was over, Alick had turned pale with rigid and nerveless features. He staggered and would almost have fallen; agitating Sir Vincent this time, who thought the poison was beginning to work. But after a moment the fanatic recovered.

'Thank you, sir,' he said, leaning on the gentleman's arm. 'I am a faithless servant. I am fearful at seeing the expected answer to my own supplication. Where is it you wish to take me, sir?'

'To the police station,' answered Sir Vincent, drily.

CHAPTER V

VINCENT having seen Alick safely bestowed for the present, returned homewards a little disturbed in his mind, and feeling extremely glad that his friend Mr. Bryant was in Everwell to deal with this sudden and extraordinary heresy. There was something most restful in the thought of theological sermons, temperance societies, emigration schemes, and penny readings. Vincent had the dimmest notions of such matters, but he was pleased to think the village was connected with a supply of such wholesome nourishment, and he proposed to turn on that tap at once.

'How fortunate,' he thought, 'that the new parson was the first question to come up. Old Septimius would have been powerless at this crisis, but my faith in Bryant is unbounded.' And then: 'How I wish I could see Nannie. She will think me profane, and what is worse, unkind, to have ordered Alick off to prison. It would be well to explain to her myself.' Only he hesitated about going to the Farm; for he liked to get hold of the girl apart from her relations. Perhaps if he pottered about near her home he might meet her somewhere. Then he thought it was

not quite right somehow to be pottering about looking for her; and he walked on. And then he came back, ridiculing any idea of impropriety or danger in an accidental meeting and a word or two about Alick. And then he remembered that Nannie had almost forbidden him to seek her again; and he turned again with a sigh, and gave up the idea of explaining about Alick at all. So he wandered hither and thither over the moor-side, so wild and desolate and removed from the ordinary surroundings of men that when he heard the puff of a train coming along the single line, the sound struck him as incongruous to the scene, and he stood still to watch this strange monster, disturbant of the peace of the lonely land.

Meanwhile, when the miracle was over and Nannie had gone home, poor Mrs. Leach had begun to feel great reaction after excitement. She had twinges of conscience, and was tearful and very talkative about repentance; at the same time she felt an increasing desire for strong waters.

'I believe Nannie would say it *was* for my health this time,' she moaned. 'Oh, Lord! I can't do without Nan to-night. Sally, my dear, do for goodness' sake run up to the Farm and bid 'em send your brother's sweetheart back to me.' The poor woman could not stop crying, and she knew Nannie

would say in her firm gentle way, 'Aunt Ann, you must be quiet.'

Sally, however, refused; and at last the excited woman resolved to go herself and see the dear girl, who was to be her blessed boy's wife, please God. And she thought that if Nannie did not forbid, she would go afterwards to Tanswick, where the publican and his wife were very respectable and great friends of hers, and probably had not yet heard the great news of the miracle; and she could get a drop of something to do her good without any one knowing. Nannie, however, was away in the dairy, and Patty said it was not convenient to call her. Mrs. Leach was not welcome, and indeed was shown the door very quickly.

But how angry was Nannie when she came in an hour or two later!

'Tanswick?' cried the girl; 'did she say she had business at Tanswick? Caroline, why didn't you keep her? Why didn't you call me? It is worst of all when she goes to Tanswick. Well, you have given me a walk. I must go after her and bring her home.' And without attending to expostulation she was off before prevention was possible. 'Oh, poor dear aunt!' said Nannie, running and panting. But she was tired enough, poor little girl, and most heartily wished herself in the little white sanctuary at home.

CHAPTER VI

'YES, aunt, I think so. I do think so,' said Nannie, imploringly. 'I will talk to Alick about it. But it isn't safe to stand here, the line curls so, and I'm sure I hear a train somewhere.'

'But, Nan,' said Mrs. Leach, who was drunk enough to be very argumentative, 'God who taught Alick to swallow the poison could do such a little thing as prevent a train coming up while we are crossing the line. If you have faith, says my blessed boy, who is like a holy 'postle to this dreadful wicked place, all drinking and lying—I ain't afeard of the train, Nannie. Why, the enging-driver can stop it hisself, so it stands to reason God Almighty can.'

'We have had enough miracles, aunt. I don't like them. Please, come on.'

'But it don't need no miracle, Nan! Why, the wheel might come off, or——'

'Aunt, I tell you there *is* a train coming! Oh, I am frightened. I am really!'

Mr. Bryant, the man of leisure, was taking his evening walk, and thinking over all manner of unpleasant things. There was a signal post near, and seeing the signal down, he checked his step and

leaned idly over the hedge, listening to the advancing puffs and watching, without thinking of it, the steam rising behind the trees which concealed the curving line. And presently he perceived two people standing talking on the line below—the line which in an instant would be traversed by the 'insupportably advancing' steam-engine. 'Hallo! Hallo!' was on his lips as he started from his idle waiting, 'what idiots you country people are, to be sure!' But the alarum died upon his stiffening lips. For it was—oh, heavens!—the very dangerous woman, the very detestable girl, whom he had just been wishing under the sea, annihilated, unborn.

'Why, what an easy frighted lass you are, to be sure, Nan! Now I ain't frighted one bit, and I'd be glad to show my blessed boy——'

'Aunt, look at it! Oh, the whistle! Oh, help, help, some one! Oh, we shall both be killed—killed!'

The whistle was blown at them indeed, and still Mrs. Leach stood there staring stupidly the opposite way. Nannie ran to the bank, and then ran back again, screaming, poor child, and beside herself, seizing Mrs. Leach's hand, but powerless to move the heavy inertia an inch. Mr. Bryant saw they were going to be crushed. Perhaps a nervous horror seized him. Probably it was so. He tried afterwards himself to believe it had been so. He uttered

no word of warning, made no step to the rescue. And the train dashed on. It was too late to do anything now. No cry of his could be heard above the rattle and the roar; no step of his could outstrip the messenger of death. With a sudden and awful realisation of what he had done, he turned and fled—never looking back; hearing Nannie's screams, confused cries and shouts, and always that diabolical railway screech, louder and louder with its note of useless warning. He ran—he hurried as if the winds were chasing him. He stumbled in the darkness, then reeled to his feet, and hurried on; till he reached his home—the pretty house he had entered with such innocent satisfaction one little month ago; where was his beautiful daughter who jumped up exclaiming at his ghastly face, and the low-born wife who was the cause of all his trouble. Emma touched his arm, and he shook her off as if she had been a viper. He felt a hatred of her enter into his soul, which he had damned in her service; he wished he had loathed instead of loved her, given her curses, chased her away into infamy, led himself not into temptation above that he was able to bear, such as was not common to man, for which was provided no way of escape.

But no one had seen Mr. Bryant, or ever learned that he had witnessed the occurrence on the railway. Nannie in her terror could discern nothing

but her motionless charge and the advancing doom; and by this time Mrs. Leach had perceived the train herself.

'Call out to the man to stop, Nan,' she cried; 'I've got a stroke like Jim Leach had. I can't move, Nannie! Oh, stop it! stop it.'

But now came a loud, distinct shout from the bank above.

'Nannie! Fly! Run to the side this instant, darling! Run! run!'

Impelled by an emotion very different from Mr. Bryant's, an instinct which gave wings to his feet and thunder to his voice,—Vincent Leicester had also been startled from his reverie by the screech of the warning whistle as the train came round the tree-shadowed curve. He was on the Tanswick side, at some distance from the level crossing; but after a moment's bewildered stare he saw the imminent peril of the two women on the line, and he saw also who the women were. How he got down the slope on the top of which he had been loitering he never knew. It was a fearful race with the powerful and heartless monster of human creation.

'Fly, Nannie, fly! Oh, my love—my love!' But he was not surprised when Nannie, instead of obeying, only clung the closer to the dazed and terrified woman who was in her charge. And

Vincent knew that the surest safety for the girl lay in the rescue of the woman. Nannie would never forgive the man who deliberately saved her and left her helpless companion to perish! There was but a moment and the thing was done. Vincent seized Mrs. Leach by the arm and forced her into safety, and Nannie saw the deliverer and added her little might to his. The train whizzed past as they stood crushed up against the wall, Vincent with a grasp of Mrs. Leach's shoulder that left the mark of his fingers for many a day, and Nannie now clinging to him and swaying with weakness.

The engine-driver stopped his train as soon as he could and sent the guard to see what had happened. So close, so fearfully close had the monster passed, it was impossible to believe that no harm had been done. But the women and their saviour had vanished; and the single line, and the narrow grass strip at each side, and the steps up the stone wall were silent and unremarkable as usual. 'Them crossings should be put down by law,' said the driver to his stoker and went on, thinking of the incident no further once the trembling of his hand had ceased.

'Mrs. Leach, you have been drinking,' said her deliverer; and bade her go home; and looked *real terrible* at her, handing her over the stile as stiff as you please, with his teeth chattering like a hailstorm;

and she wept and obeyed him right away, for 'his words was dreadful true, and had a sting in 'em like the tail of a wasp!'

But Vincent remained with Nannie. The events of the day had been too much for her. She had fainted.

CHAPTER VII

He kissed her to life again, there alone on the moor-side, the cold moon all the time watching as harmless a pair of lovers as ever her chaste beams had brightened. When Nannie opened her eyes, she looked up into his and felt his lips on hers, to which some slow warmth was returning. She was in his arms and for a few moments her spirit was wrapped in a lull of great happiness, while closing her sweet eyes again she rested her gentle head against his breast.

'Nannie! Nannie!' murmured Vincent, 'don't be frightened, my own treasure. You are quite safe. All the danger is over now.'

Nannie did not stir for a moment. Then her heart began to beat violently, and her full consciousness returned. 'What are you doing?' she cried suddenly, sitting up straight and throwing off his embrace. 'You must not touch me like this! Go away.'

It was a great revulsion of feeling for Vincent, who had forgotten everything but that he loved her, and that she had been restored to him out of imminent peril. He obeyed however, rising and moving back a few steps to the low wall skirting the line. Nannie remained sitting on the ground, and for a few minutes they gazed at each other silently out of reproachful eyes, their faces pale and agitated. The crisis had come suddenly, but they both recognised it. After a few minutes Nannie burst into tears.

'I didn't think—I didn't believe you would have done so!' she said. 'How could you?'

'Nannie, how could I not? When I love you, and when I had thought you were going to be killed before my eyes? I have done you no harm, Nannie. An honest man's love never did any woman harm. What are you afraid of?'

'I am not afraid,' said Nannie, proudly; 'there is nothing you can do to me, sir; to me. But you oughtn't never to have touched me when I couldn't speak to say, go away. And you must not talk to me of love.' Her voice shook.

'If I have erred, Nannie, I ask your forgiveness. I am going to talk to you of love. I love you as my life, Nannie. I have loved you from the first moment I saw you. I want no love but yours.'

'No,' said Nannie, trembling, 'you and me

mustn't never love each other. Please, sir, I would rather get home now, if you will let me.'

He raised her to her feet, and supported her while she stood for a moment to collect her strength.

'Do you remember the day in the boat, Nannie?' said Vincent, gently, holding her hands and pressing them to his breast. 'I think—you love me now.'

The girl raised her head. 'Perhaps I do,' she said, simply, 'I do not know. If I do, it's the more reason you shouldn't talk to me so.'

'My sweet Nannie! Oh, my darling! Yes, Nannie, I may—I will—to gain you as my wife,' said Vincent.

'Oh no, no,' cried the girl, 'you know I couldn't. Oh, let me go!'

He led her homewards, one arm supporting her and his hand clasping hers, for she was very weak and could not refuse his assistance to her tottering steps. They were still a long way from the farm-house.

'I will not take your answer now, Nannie,' said Vincent, presently. 'Only remember we *have* spoken to each other of love; and that, even if we wished it, we can never get back to where we were yesterday.' Nannie made no answer, but a little sob.

After some distance, he seated her on a rock beside the path. She consented silently, her tearful eyes

watching the moon floating amid the torn clouds. Vincent stood by her side looking down upon her, his hand on her shoulder. At last Nannie's eyes travelled slowly from the heavens to his face, and rested there. Then Vincent took from his finger a ring which he always wore and gave it to her gravely.

'I want you, Nannie,' he said, 'to keep that, till in a day or two I see you again and talk to you again of love. That ring, Nannie, was given to my dead father by my mother, and was a pledge between two brave, good people that they meant fairly and truly by each other. There is a word on it in a strange language which means Faith. It is one of the most sacred things I possess, Nannie. And dearest—dearest, I give it to you, to-night, as a pledge—' he paused for a moment, seeking an expression which would say all he meant, but without startling her, 'that I love you fairly and truly; and that your love, if I might gain it, would be always to me a priceless and a sacred treasure.'

Nannie's thoughtful eyes still rested on his as she took the ring and held it a little doubtfully. 'But it could not be! oh, how could it be?' she said, with trembling lips.

'I would find some way, dearest,' said Vincent, passionately.

'No, no,' cried Nannie again, as if afraid to face the thought so dangerously sweet. But she tied

the ring on a ribbon round her throat, hiding it below her dress. Then she rose again and stepped wearily on, Vincent beside her.

'Please,' said Nannie, shyly, 'I haven't thanked you for pulling us away from the train. You saved our lives.'

'And my own, Nannie. How could I have survived seeing you crushed? Darling, will you give me one dear kiss, at least on that pretext—that we were in great danger together?'

She raised her lips to his simply enough. Nannie had always been chary of her kisses. She was half frightened to feel how gladly she gave that one.

CHAPTER VIII

'REFLECTION, you may come to-morrow.' For the present, Vincent's only feeling was one of immense relief and triumph. She loved him! She had confessed it! She would be his! No more attempts at stifling that overmastering desire; no more useless struggles against Fate; no more propriety in galvanic flirtations with Georgina; no more semi-criminal attempts to maintain himself in a false position. Right or wrong, he had pledged himself now to this trusting and innocent girl; he had

chosen his part and would abide by it right manfully. As he had bidden Nannie remember, it was impossible now to get back to where they had stood yesterday! And to-night, feeling so strongly how beautiful and how good she was, fairer and sweeter and nobler, it seemed, than any woman he had known, Vincent felt ashamed of his hesitation, ashamed that love's confession had burst from him half involuntarily at the last, instead of having been his deliberate purpose from the first moment of his passion. Difficulties? what were they? Man was invented to overcome difficulties! Difficulty becomes delight when the guerdon to be gained is of priceless value. And to-night—to-night—with her pure kiss on his lips, the echo of her sweet voice in his ears, the heaven of her starry eyes in his memory,—to-night when she had lain unconscious in his arms and had awaked to life and to love in his embrace, while the soft summer airs wrapped them round and the distant waves made nature's music, and the chaste Diana who had loved the shepherd bathed them in her liquid glory, it was not possible for the lover to see one defect in the maid he loved. She was pure, she was delicate; brave and resolute and strong. And she was beautiful as the sea and the stars, as the sunlit clouds, as the soft hush of gentle-footed evening; beautiful as a young man's dream, as the wave-born goddess, who lays a spell on the hearts

of men; as Eve in the garden of Paradise. And she loved him. She would certainly be his. There was no room for thought beyond desire and exultation in the sparkling glow of Hope.

'Reflection, you may come to-morrow.'

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